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# Why Parents in San Bernardino Choose Public Charter Schools Over Traditional Public Schools

Robert Moss

Brandman University, [moss4401@mail.brandman.edu](mailto:moss4401@mail.brandman.edu)

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Why Parents in San Bernardino Choose Public Charter Schools Over Traditional

Public Schools

A Dissertation by

Robert Moss

Brandman University

Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

April 2018

Committee in charge:

Douglas DeVore, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Paulette Koss, Ed.D.

Esmirna Valencia, Ed.D.

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY

Chapman University System

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

The dissertation of Robert Moss is approved.

\_\_\_\_\_, Dissertation Chair  
Douglas DeVore, Ed.D.

\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Member  
Paulette Koss, Ed.D.

\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Member  
Esmirna Valencia, Ed.D.

\_\_\_\_\_, Associate Dean  
Patricia Clark-White, Ed.D.

April 2018

Why Parents in San Bernardino Choose Public Charter Schools Over Traditional  
Public Schools

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This dissertation is dedicated to the children of the world who struggle with believing in themselves. It is for you that I trekked through this doctoral journey to prove it is not race, social status, gender, nor age, but perseverance that leads to any finish line.

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I would also like to acknowledge my chair, Dr. Douglas DeVore and committee members Dr. Esmirna Valencia and Dr. Paulette Koss, thank you for guiding me through this journey!

## ABSTRACT

### Why Parents in San Bernardino Choose Public Charter Schools Over Traditional Public Schools

by Robert Moss

**Purpose.** The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the attributes of public charter schools considered important for the selection of a charter school as perceived by the parents of charter school students. A second purpose of this study was to identify the sources parents used to inform their decision to enroll their child in a charter school.

**Methodology.** This qualitative study was accomplished by interviewing parents of public charter school students in three districts within San Bernardino County. The interview consisted of nine open-ended questions and each interview was recorded to ensure accuracy of the responses. The results of the interview were analyzed and organized into a narrative form. The population for the study included parents of public charter school students.

**Findings.** The participants noted smaller class sizes, higher educational quality, and a more nurturing environment as the main reasons for selecting a public charter school. Their answers also indicated the variety of programs available to them at charter schools influenced their decision to enroll their children. Participants noted talking with friends and family as a major source of gathering information about schools. Using some form of the internet was also instrumental for parents when obtaining information about a given school.

**Conclusions.** The results of this study supported the conclusion that parent perceptions of schools and the education they offer may be more influential than the school's performance on state assessments. Results indicated many other factors influenced a parent's selection of a school. A positive environment, which cultivated learning, and a variety of educational opportunities were crucial attributes for many parents.

**Recommendations.** The researcher recommended the study be replicated in a different region of California to see if the results remain the same. Additionally, a study should be conducted to see how many and why parents removed their children from public charter schools and returned them to traditional public schools.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Creation of the nation’s first charter school law surprised even its most ardent supporters. Today, schools need more collaboration from all corners in order to deliver a better education”  
– Junge

Public education was typecast as the culprit for everything from high crime rates to teen pregnancies. According to Berliner and Glass (2014), the American public was duped into believing the school system was a failure. The traditional public school system had dismal performance in many major cities across the United States. As identified by Ravitch (2010), it was not schools that were the culprit for underachieving students, but poverty and segregation. The U.S. dropout rate and high teacher turnover rate were the topic of many important discussions. As explained by Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, and Fox (2012), although graduation rates continually improved, over one million high school students dropped out of school each year. Stakeholders wondered how to improve education for everyone, and the introduction of charter schools came about as a solution to the many issues facing public education (Balfanz et al., 2012). According to Junge (2014), implementation of charter schools could cause traditional public schools to become more effective. Junge concluded, “If a school is not working, let’s end it. That’s how we’ll improve public education for all” (p. 17).

Over 6,000 students attended charter schools in 2016-17 school year with the hopes of a better education (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). However, research showed charter schools did not consistently outperform traditional public schools. “Comparable findings were reported by strong charter advocates, and a report focusing on New York City schools found no difference between public schools and charters” (Honig, 2016, p. 2). Both high achieving charters and traditional public schools exist, just as there are low performing schools from both groups. Researchers

found mixed results as to whether charter performance was better or worse than traditional public schools (Berends, Watral, Teasley, & Nicotera, 2008). Blazer (2010) argued charter school students performed on par with or below students at the local traditional public school. Furthermore, researchers conclude inconsistent findings and cited the disparity in the quality, size, and funding of charter schools for the inconsistency (Blazer, 2010). Honig (2016) explained many charter school success stories contained elements of dishonesty. Many of these charter schools enrolled fewer English language learners and special education students, as opposed to accepting all students like the traditional counterparts.

Although growing in popularity, “these inconsistent findings have led some researchers to conclude that the rapid growth of the charter school movement has significantly outpaced the evidence supporting its impact on student achievement” (Blazer, 2010, p. 1). Parents, under the impression charter schools would better serve their children, removed their children from traditional public schools in favor of charter schools. However, organizations were opening charter schools with little prior experience whereas success stories were indicative of particular schools (Baude, Casey, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2014). For example, Berends et al. (2008) noted many charter schools were more effective than other charter schools because of specific conditions, such as their curriculum alignment, focus on strategies, or type of students attending the school. Berends et al. (2008) stated charter school reforms were a worthy pursuit, but the effectiveness of charter schools remained inconclusive. Berliner and Glass (2014) noted some “rags-to-riches” stories existed where charter schools outperformed traditional public schools; however, that was not the norm. Furthermore, the literature indicated

many charter schools closed before they could be included in a second study (Berliner & Glass, 2014).

As parents continue to move their children from traditional public schools to pursue a charter school education, the question remains whether it is a wise choice. Students moving to charter schools reduces the funding of traditional public schools, and may create segregation, be it racial, economic, or value-driven (Bosetti, 2004). Continuing to open ineffective charter schools, while recruiting students from traditional public schools, is a disservice to all stakeholders in public education (Bosetti, 2004). Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, and Branch (2006) questioned if parents knew enough about school operations to make an informed decision regarding which type of school would best serve their children.

### **Background**

Charter schools were introduced in 1991 and grew steadily ever since (Education Evolving, 2010). As an alternative to traditional public education, charter schools are public schools that operate independently via a contract and approval by the state or local authorizing agency. Charter schools are similar to public schools in that they are publicly funded and their students must participate in statewide testing programs; however, they are schools of choice, which means that parents must choose to enroll their children (Blazer, 2010). Although teachers and administrators at charter schools had more autonomy, they remained accountable to an authorizer that sanctioned the school.

Teachers, parents, or other community members interested in alternative methods of education usually created charter schools (Berends, 2015). Bifulco and Ladd (2006) pointed out that charter school programs were intended to increase student achievement

by providing teachers with more autonomy and affording students a more diversified curriculum. The flexibility of charter schools allowed teachers to be more creative and implement innovative strategies and techniques within the classroom (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006).

### **History of the Charter School Movement**

The idea of a charter school was born in 1974 by an educator named Ray Budde (Education Evolving, 2010). The original design was for teachers to present their innovative ideas for improvement to a district, as opposed to creating schools, with a desired result of higher achievement. Schneider (2016) asserted that Budde's ideas were to revolutionize education via stakeholder input. According to Bifulco and Ladd (2006), charter schools were supposed to provide an alternative to the rule-stricken traditional public schools by offering more autonomy; the competition from charter schools was intended to motivate traditional public schools to be more productive. The first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992 (Junge, 2014).

Today, approximately 7,000 charters schools operate throughout the United States serving about 6% of U.S. students (Honig, 2016). Most charter schools are in urban areas, with a high percentage of charters being open less than three years (Honig, 2016). Because of their unique structure and focus, charter schools are growing in popularity and many families are on waiting lists to enroll their students. Charter schools exist in 42 states and are constantly strengthening their practices to better education (Junge, 2014). School leaders and teachers exhibited their innovative strategies and policies by developing charter schools (Junge, 2014). Advocates of charter schools viewed them as alternatives for parents of students in low-achieving schools, whereas critics supported

the research that showed charter schools did not outperform traditional public schools (Ravitch, 2013). As Lundy (2013) concluded, with each charter school being different, one cannot make a blanket statement when assessing charter schools.

### **School Choice**

The 2016 Education Next Poll (Education Next, 2016) found Americans were extremely dissatisfied with the quality of the nation's schools. However, Ravitch (2010) states the approval rating for public schools is the highest since 1985. Parents dissatisfied with traditional public education, could chose private schools, homeschooling, or charter schools. Many parents lack the resources or financial stability to homeschool or enroll their children in private schools. Charters schools are free and give parents the opportunity for their children to pursue specialized programs, such as performing arts, dual languages, or even credit recovery for high school students (GreatSchools, 2016). Hanushek et al. (2007) found parents viewed charter schools as a way to exercise their choice and seek different educational options for their child while maintaining some local district control. All parents want a quality education for their child, but it was assumed parents would choose the better performing school for their children if given a choice (Villavicencio, 2013). The problem with this presumption was that one must assume parents had equal access to the knowledge about the available schools.

Villavicencio (2013) stated parental differences in priorities for selecting a charter school that fits their child's needs made it difficult for parents to rate the quality of a school. Berliner and Glass (2014) found even when parents were informed about charter schools, they were sometimes deterred by lengthy applications, entrance exams, and extremely short windows of accepting applications. Berliner and Glass (2014) stated

financially secure families could pay for uniforms, adhere to time commits, meet registration deadlines, and provide transportation to the charter schools. Other variables, like family values, reputation, distance from the home, and the parents' own perceived level of choice, also played a role in the selection of a school for their children (Berliner & Glass, 2014).

Debate remains about the effectiveness of charter schools at increasing student achievement. Blazer (2010) and Bifulco and Ladd (2006) agreed inconsistent findings made it difficult to accurately assess how effective charter schools were at increasing student performance on state tests. Opponents of charter schools claimed these schools of choice did not increase the academic performance of students; however, with charter schools having a particular focus, coupled with smaller classes sizes, some researchers thought the present findings may not be accurate when comparing traditional public schools and charter schools (Raymond, 2014). It was difficult to draw conclusions about the success or failure of charter schools at a national level because of differing state laws and achievement tests (GreatSchools, 2016).

The most common benefits of charter schools were smaller class sizes, broader curriculum (e.g., arts, enrichment), a sense of community, and innovative strategies and techniques (Why Choose Charter Schools, 2015). However, parents had a wide variety of reasons for selecting a charter school. According to Vanderhoff (2008), economically disadvantaged parents in low-income areas were concerned with safety and hours of instruction, whereas wealthy families were concerned about the number of honors classes. Although charter schools provided many advantages for parents, such as catering to their specific needs, there were also disadvantages to charter schools. Anyone can start



a charter school; therefore, those implementing the charter may be driven by financial gain as opposed to bettering education for all (Ravitch, 2013). Another major drawback of attending a charter school was that they “aren’t always equipped to sufficiently accommodate children with either advanced learning capabilities or learning disabilities” (Why Choose Charter Schools, 2015, para. 16).

**Who selects charter schools.** Regardless of economic status or ethnicity, almost parents chose charter schools in anticipation of receiving better educational quality for their children (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). The pattern throughout the United States showed that most traditional and charter schools within proximity of each other had similar racial and ethnic compositions (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, Wang, & Orfield, 2012). However, Black and White families differed in their enrollment percentages. Charter schools showed a disproportionately high percentage of Black students and a low percentage of White students in comparison to local traditional schools (Frankenberg et al., 2012). In addition to this disproportionality, when Black students were overrepresented in a charter school, the student body was predominately minority (Frankenberg, 2012). According to Lundy (2013), charter schools were popular with African Americans because many African American students felt disconnected with the traditional public school. In contrast, when White students were overrepresented in a charter school, it was usually located in an area that was predominately White (Frankenberg et al., 2012). Charter schools with a high representation of White students were less racially diverse than the traditional public schools in the same area. On average, White students were underrepresented in charter schools throughout the nation (Frankenberg et al., 2012). Most research indicated charter schools served a greater

percentage of Black students and a lower percentage of special education and limited English proficient students (Blazer, 2010). If researchers hope to understand why parents choose the schools they do, then an effort must be made to understand the parents' values (Bell, 2005).

Public charter schools have been gaining popularity for years; however, researchers found it was not solely because charters were of high quality. Villavicencio (2013) pointed out school choice being driven by school quality was a misconception and there were a variety of reasons why parents chose charter schools. Kamenetz (2015) found the academic achievement scores of a school was ranked lower than other school attributes among parents choosing alternative schools.

### **Attributes of Charter Schools**

Attributes such as distance from the home, extended learning hours, afterschool programs, extracurricular programs, racial and ethnic composition, and socioeconomic status were important reasons for parents selecting a public charter school (Kamenetz, 2015). Many successful charter schools had more committed personnel and a more positive school climate (Takemoto, 2004). Although charter schools were often individual in nature, many of these schools had smaller class sizes and longer school days, as well as longer school years (Why Choose Charter Schools, 2015).

**Distance from home.** Location was also an important factor for parents when selecting a school for their child. Regardless of its reputation, a school that was conveniently located was more of a draw for most parents. According to Kleitz et al. (2000), parents with fewer resources were more likely to state that location was an important attribute when choosing a public charter school.

**Extracurricular programs.** Another major characteristic of schools popular with parents was the type of extracurricular programs offered. Many public charter schools offer students a chance to study a specific subject area and some even focus on character development (Why Choose Charter Schools, 2015). Families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds tended to care more about things like the reputation of the school's athletic teams as opposed to whether the school offered band or had a strong sense of community (Villavicencio, 2013).

**Socioeconomic status.** Evidence from parent interviews concluded that race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status played a role in how parents decided where to send their children (Villavicencio, 2013). Not all parents had the same access to resources that supported finding the best school for their child. The household preferences of parents, which were sometimes related to income, may also affect how parents choose a school for their child (Kleitz et al., 2000).

### **Effects of Charter Schools**

Many researchers had conflicting views about whether charter schools improved education. Freyvogel (2015) confirmed charter schools aimed to equalize educational opportunities and provide more choices for students. Both traditional public schools and charter schools alike could be successful, but the key was knowing under what conditions charter schools were effective at increasing student achievement (Berends et al., 2008). Another goal of charter schools was to serve as incubation labs to reform how students were educated; aside from being innovative and allowing teachers autonomy, charters also provided competition for traditional public schools (RAND, 2009). This

competition was intended to motivate traditional schools to find new ways of increasing student achievement.

**Academic results.** Blazer (2010) reported it was extremely difficult to judge the effectiveness of charter schools in comparison with traditional public schools because charter schools had a different structural design. Consequently, research findings were either from supporters or opponents of charter school. RAND (2009) reported charter school achievement results were lower than that of traditional public schools. Most research did not support charter school advocates claims of increased student achievement. According to Lundy (2013), some studies showed positive effects for charter schools, while others showed no differences or a negative effect. Based on the findings of Honig (2016), some charter schools were excellent educational institutions; however, many more were educational catastrophes. Hanushek et al. (2007) proposed charter schools were popular and satisfied many parental preferences, but lacked solid evidence supporting their academic quality. Berends et al. (2008) asserted more rigorous charter school studies would provide a more beneficial result, which could be used to further the discussion on the effectiveness of charter schools.

**Parental involvement.** Research found charter school parents were more involved in school activities and events. As explained by Berliner and Glass (2014), some charter schools required parental involvement, usually in the form of volunteer hours. Charter schools seemed to attract more involved parents and some charters provide opportunities for parents to be actively involved. Charter schools were significantly more likely to support parental participation and usually required teachers to recruit parents for participation in their child's academic life and school events (Bifulco

& Ladd, 2006). Parent participation strategies and other positive qualities of charter schools could be adopted by traditional public education and vice versa. Bosetti (2004) stated market theory would result in better education for all students, regardless of what type of school they attended.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Stakeholders and policymakers focused on improving the quality of the educational system for many years. School leaders and educational officials agreed that charter schools could be the answer. Many researchers, such as Junge (2014), believed implementing charter schools would motivate traditional public schools to change. However, research about the effects of charter schools on student achievement were mixed. Bifulco and Ladd (2006) concluded charter school negatively impacted students in terms of math and reading achievement, where as in Los Angeles, the charter school movement successfully increased student achievement (Whitmire, 2016). As a nation, it was difficult to ascertain the impact of charter schools because state laws and charter school structures varied across the country (Honig, 2016).

High achieving students were found in traditional public schools and charter schools alike. Blazer (2010) concluded charter schools had not positively or negatively affected the achievement of students attending local traditional public schools. According to Fryer (2014), traditional public schools could increase student achievement by implementing the best practices used by successful charter schools.

Hanushek et al. (2007) ascertained opening charter schools increased parental choice and provided competition in public education. Although the increase in parental choice was true, most research favoring charter school growth in achievement was

inconsistent (Baude et al., 2014). For example, big businesses and philanthropists fund some charters, whereas others were ill-equipped and lacked material and financial resources (GreatSchools, 2016).

Many parents chose a charter school, as opposed to a traditional public school, in hopes of providing a better education for their child. Villavicencio (2013) argued school officials assumed parents were choosing schools based upon the quality of the school, but her research indicated various factors affected parental choice. Other factors parents used to select a school included: location, safety, student friendships, and parental access to school information (Villavicencio, 2013).

Researchers understood parents were in search of a better education for their children; however, researchers did not truly understand why parents were drawn to charter schools as opposed to traditional public schools (Villavicencio, 2013). It was assumed parents would choose a school based on the quality of its program, including teachers and test scores (Villavicencio, 2013). Overall, charter schools did not prove to be higher quality than traditional public schools (Blazer, 2010; Hanushek et al., 2007; Honig, 2016; Junge, 2014). Although parents wanted the best education for their child, they did not always select the school ranking highest in quality. Factors such as economics, race, network, and access to school information also impacted how parents selected schools for their children (Villavicencio, 2013). Parents may be exiting students based on their dissatisfaction with the current school or entering a charter because of the school's specialized curriculum (Kamenetz, 2015). Knowing what parents valued would help educators to better understand why parents chose schools. Educational research in

New Orleans supported this claim and stated, “parents appear to be more interested in factors other than academic quality as the state defines it” (Kamenetz, 2015, para. 11).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the attributes of public charter schools considered important for the selection of a charter school as perceived by the parents of charter school students. A second purpose of this study was to identify the sources parents used to inform their decision to enroll their child in a charter school.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?
2. What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before deciding to enroll their student in a charter school?

### **Significance of the Problem**

This study produced essential information about the competition between public charter schools and traditional public education. Charter schools were introduced to the American public as a method of educational reform by giving parents an alternative in public education (Why Choose Charters Schools, 2015). Although it was the parents’ right to select the school of their choice, many researchers claimed choosing charter schools was not always beneficial for students (Villavicencio, 2013). Concerns rose that students could become victims of stratification based on parental education, income, or access to information (Mead & Green, 2012). According to Villavicencio (2013), parents

used a variety of factors when choosing to enroll their child in a charter school or a traditional public school.

Although charter schools are held accountable and must be approved by local school districts, not all charter schools are created equal. Researchers agreed findings regarding charter school achievement was inconsistent (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Blazer, 2010; Honig, 2016). Great charter schools and great traditional schools exist, just as there are underachieving schools from both arenas. Parents may choose charters based on their popularity or the school's smaller size, but the charter school's academic performance may be suffering (GreatSchools, 2016).

This research investigated why parents chose a charter school instead of sending their children to a traditional public school. It was especially important to examine why a parent would send their child to an unproven or underachieving charter school as opposed to the public school. Hanushek et al. (2007) stated a charter school's alternative focus and principles...

may not map simply into measured student achievement, and, as such, consumers with different preferences may well be making optimal choices based on private criteria—even if their charter schools do not exceed the regular public alternative in terms of math and reading performance. (p. 22)

School leaders and policymakers could find the results of this study useful in retaining students. Parents could benefit from this study by learning which deciding factors were used by other parents when selecting schools. According to Baude et al. (2014), only a limited amount research existed on charter school quality. It was hard to



measure the quality of charter schools because charter schools varied greatly. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools created their own curricula, making it difficult to compare, and therefore making it nearly impossible for parents to make an educated decision about which school was better (Honig, 2016).

### **Definitions**

**Academic Achievement.** A multifaceted construct that identifies varying levels of mastery (King, 2016).

**Media:** The term media refers to traditional media (e.g., radio, television, print materials) as opposed to social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).

**Parental Decision-Making.** How parental values impact their educational preferences for their children (Kleitz et al., 2000).

**Private School.** Independent schools for which parents pay a tuition (Bosetti, 2004).

**Public Charter School.** A public school that may provide instruction in any grades created or organized by a group of teachers, parents, community leaders, or community-based organizations (California Department of Education, 2017).

**School Choice:** The combination of public, magnet, private, and charter schools, and voucher systems, for which parents may choose for their child's education (Berends et al., 2008).

**Social media:** Applications like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter with a more social purpose than traditional media outlets (e.g., newspaper, television).

**Traditional media:** Information delivered via television news, newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts and the like.

**Traditional Public School:** A school that is a part of the conventional, restricted education system.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations for this research were:

1. Participants were delimited to parents with students attending charter schools within San Bernardino County, California.
2. The study was delimited to three districts, each contain one participating charter school.
3. The time span for data collection was delimited to three weeks.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study consists of five chapters, beginning with an overview and ending with an analysis of the researcher's findings. Chapter I provided an overview that introduced the topic, purpose, research questions, and definitions. Chapter II reviews seminal author's thoughts about the area of interest. Chapter III explains the methodology used in conducting the research. The data collected and research findings are presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V summarizes the study and offers conclusions and recommendations for future study.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study sought to examine why parents selected public charter schools instead of traditional public schools. Both types of schools provided education a free, but traditional public schools accepted all students living within a predetermined area whereas charter schools had open enrollments and selected students via a lottery system if more applications were received than seats available (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016). Charter schools provided more flexibility regarding the curriculum offered and typically had smaller class sizes, but did not always have fully credentialed teachers (Berends, 2015). Charter schools are currently the most popular schools of choice for parents looking for an alternative to traditional public schools (Junge, 2014). As part of the educational reform movement, charter schools were a main topic of discussion. With both strong support for charter schools and relentless opposition who believed that charter schools were a detriment to public education, the charter school remains.

Chapter II provides an extensive review of the literature pertaining to the reasons why parents chose charter schools rather than traditional public schools. The literature review begins with the history of charter schools, including their development, current growth, and future possible growth. The literature review examines school choice, including competition, conflict, and how parents choose public education. Another topic of the literature review addressed who selects charter schools. The literature review closes with an assessment of the effects of public charter schools, from student achievement to the impact on the district. The researcher developed a synthesis matrix (Appendix A) of the literature to support the writing of the literature review.

## **History of Charter Schools**

An educator named Ray Budde first publicly introduced the idea of a charter school in 1974. According to Patrick (1999), Budde's charter school concept was to restructure education to empower innovative teachers and provide competition for the traditional education model. The process of opening a charter school, otherwise known as "chartering," did not mandate a particular type of school. Junge (2014) stated educational leaders were empowered to try new and different approaches to learning. In 1992, Ray Budde's vision became reality as the first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota.

As early as 1985, stakeholders in Minnesota's education system were brainstorming ideas for choices beyond traditional public schooling. One idea was to restructure local education by allowing inter-district enrollment, which offered families a wider variety of school choices (Education Evolving, 2010). As groups like the Citizen's League (a nonprofit group designed to empower people to take active roles in the creation of public policy) and the Northeast Regional Education Laboratory (a publicly funded research center designed to improve academic outcomes) publicized the need for change, Albert Shanker (the leader of the American Federation of Teachers at the time) proposed the creation of new autonomous schools called charter schools. From 1988 until its passing in 1991, Minnesota proponents of charter schools, including the Citizen's League, struggled to gain approval from the state. After Minnesota's successful charter school bill passed in 1991, California followed suit in 1992, and by 1993 six more states joined the education reform movement by enacting chartering laws (Education Evolving, 2010).

Charter schools are public schools run by parents, community members, teachers, or private organizations (Why Choose Charter Schools, 2015). Public charter schools provide more autonomy than traditional public schools; however, charter schools remain accountable to an authorizer, which is usually a local school district, institute of higher education, or state agency. Charter school developers apply for *charters*, which function as licenses to operate, that are reviewed and renewed every few years; if charter schools fail to meet agreed upon standards, their charters could be revoked or not renewed. The government funds public charter schools; therefore, they are held accountable to most state and federal regulations. Although no financial obligation is associated with attending public charter schools, parents may be asked to volunteer at the school site or participate school activities (Why Choose Charter Schools, 2015).

### **Development of Charter Schools**

Bifulco and Ladd (2006) reported charter schools were one of the fastest growing forms of school choice in the nation. Charter schools were granted freedom regarding what they taught, how it was taught, and how they spent state funds. Although charter schools had more freedom, they were also held strictly accountable for their academic and financial performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The public charter school objective was to increase student learning by promoting educational innovation, differentiating learning environments, and implementing a variety of scholastic programs. This was possible because charter schools were granted more freedom and flexibility than traditional public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). For public charter schools to receive federal funding, they must comply with federal guidelines (Vickers, 2014).

## Growth of Charter Schools

Charter schools were designed to provide an alternative to traditional public schools. After their inception in Minnesota in 1992, public charter schools expanded to 42 states throughout the United States (Junge, 2014). According to Vanderhoff (2008), the number of charter school attendees increased by 81%, and the number of charter schools increased by 52% between 2002 to 2007 (see Table 1). David, Hesla, and Pendergrass (2017) pointed out charter school enrollment nearly tripled between the 2006-07 and 2016-17 school years. Such charter school growth exemplified the importance parents placed on educational reform (Vickers, 2014). Ziebarth (2017) confirmed only six states lacked charter school laws.

Table 1

### *Growth of Public Charter Schools 1999-2000 through 2012-2013*

Year	# of Schools	% of Schools	Number of States
1999-2000	1,542	1.7%	31
2000-2001	1,941	2.1%	35
2001-2002	2,313	2.5%	35
2002-2003	2,559	2.7%	37
2003-2004	2,959	3.1%	39
2004-2005	3,383	3.6%	41
2005-2006	3,689	3.9%	41
2006-2007	3,999	4.2%	41
2007-2008	4,299	4.4%	41
2008-2009	4,640	4.8%	41
2009-2010	4,913	5.0%	41
2010-2011	5,259	5.4%	41
2011-2012	5,618	5.8%	42
2012-2013	6,002	NA	43

*Note.* Data retrieved from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2013).

Although charter schools were in existence since 1991, the number of students attending charter schools rose dramatically over the last 10 years (Berends, 2015).

Unlike traditional public schools, for which attendance was predetermined by street

address, parents chose to enroll their children in a charter school. David et al. (2017) claimed parental demand for charter schools was high because they met family needs, including closing achievement gaps. Additionally, charter schools revitalized communities, boosted graduation rates, and increased academic achievement of their students (David et al., 2017).

### **School Choice**

The term school choice refers to the variety of options parents have when selecting a school for their children. Families can choose schools, using education funding, to select schools that best fit their child's needs. Along with public charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, homeschooling, vouchers, and traditional public schools comprise what is known as school choice (Pascual, 2017).

#### **Types of School Choice Options**

**Vouchers.** In some states and cities, families with children at public schools could use vouchers to send their children to private schools. Vouchers took funds allocated to the public school for that child to be used as payment at a private school.

**Charter schools.** According to Hanushek et al. (2007), charter schools became the main competition for traditional public education. Due to their popularity, many charter schools had more applications than seats available. To ensure equal access these schools of choice, most charter schools implemented a lottery system for enrollment. According to Henry (2009), lottery implementation was in accordance with government admissions codes that required fair student admission practices. An illustration of the need for fairness was found among the charter schools in New York City; in 2013-14, 69,000 students applied for approximately 19,000 open seats (New York City Charter

School Center, 2017). Any parent could apply to a charter school and no preference was typically given for high test scores, ethnicity, or measures of ability. However, a charter school could provide admission preferences or weighted lotteries to increase the likelihood of admission for certain at-risk groups if the charter school's authorizer approved such lotteries (Henry, 2009).

**Traditional public schools.** A traditional public school referred to a K-12 school free to the public that usually required the attending family to live within a predetermined distance from the school. According to Chen (2017), the federal, state, and local governments funded public schools; maintained zoning requirements; and provided a general, rigid curriculum. Public schools were generally two or more times the size of their private school counterparts. According to Kiernan (2016), the achievement levels of public school students and those attending private schools differed only slightly, indicating family characteristics (e.g., education level, income, values) had a larger impact on the success rate of the students.

**Magnet schools.** Magnet schools referred to public schools with a concentration on a theme, such as technology, math and science, or fine arts. Chen (2017) defined magnet schools as public schools without boundary restrictions. These schools could be open to the public; however, their lack of zoning requirements increased their popularity so most enacted a lottery system (Magnet Schools of America, 2017). Magnet schools were often publicly and privately funded, which allowed for a wider variety of educational programs. Magnet schools differed from charter schools because magnet schools could not be for-profit and had to adhere to all public school laws. In contrast,



charter schools could be either public or private and had freedom from certain public school laws (Pascual, 2017).

**Private schools.** Private schools were typically selective by nature, allowing admittance based on their criteria (GreatSchools, 2017). Although many private schools helped enroll students, they were not obligated to do so, nor did they need to admit or develop a curriculum for special needs students. Unlike public schools, private schools were not publicly funded so they had more autonomy regarding all aspects of education. As such, private schools usually had smaller class sizes than public schools; however, private school teachers were not required to complete the same certifications as public school teachers (GreatSchools, 2017). Chen (2017) stated private school families paid tuition, which made attendance unfeasible for some families. According to Pascual (2017), an inexpensive private school could charge upwards of \$3,000, and boarding schools could range from \$30,000 to \$60,000. The SAIS, also known as, Serving and Accrediting Independent Schools (2017) stated the average tuition for private alternative day schools was approximately \$19,000.

### **Competition**

Charter school advocates argued they would benefit all students, including those at traditional public schools, by providing options for parents and competition for public schools. According to Villavicencio (2013), some stakeholders believed creating competition with traditional public schools would force schools to perform better academically. Davis (2013) contended the threat of charter schools absorbing an area's students would drive the local traditional school to higher performance, although no evidence supported this theory. Bifulco and Ladd (2006) stated, "The achievement of

students in traditional public schools could rise if the competition from charter schools for students and funding induced traditional public schools to become more productive” (p. 51). However, Davis (2013) found no significant correlation between the distance between public charter schools and traditional public schools and the level of achievement on math and reading scores. Similarly, Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, and Rothstein (2005) found no evidence charter school competition had a positive effect on the achievement of students in traditional public schools. Based on the findings of RAND (2009), public charter schools did not positively influence traditional public schools in terms of achievement scores.

Arsen and Ni (2015) found little evidence regarding the effects of competition from charter schools on traditional public schools, and the few results available showed mixed or insignificant effects. However, Holley, Egalite, and Lueken (2013) investigated whether district leaders implemented new ways of retaining students in response to the competition from charter and other choice schools, and concluded district leaders collaborated with charter schools. They found districts were partnering with charter schools to operate schools, replicating charter school techniques and strategies, and increasing the district’s own advertising of school programs to students and their families (Holley et al., 2013). Aside from improving education for all students, another reason for district schools to compete with charters related to finances. Traditional schools received funding based on the average daily attendance (ADA), the total number of days students attended divided by the number of days of instruction (California Department of Education, 2016). Schools must retain students to maintain high ADA rates and avoid

reduced funding. Charter schools negatively impacted the finances of local districts because students exited the district to attend charter schools (Arsen & Ni, 2015).

Competition between charter schools and traditional public schools led to a nationwide conflict. According to San Francisco State University professor Mark Phillips (Phillips, 2017), “leaders on both sides need to work together, perhaps with an impartial facilitator, to develop a win-win situation” (para 16). Regardless, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2017) confirmed voters in Massachusetts opposed the addition of 12 charter schools in low-performing districts, noting charter school advocates and opponents reported advantages and disadvantages of introducing new charter schools.

### **What Charter Schools Offer**

#### **Accountability**

Charter school accountability often centered on performance and the academic achievement of the students. Unlike traditional public schools, a charter school would be closed if it did not meet the agreed upon goals stated in its charter (Great Schools, 2016). Charter school regulations and state assessments varied from state-to-state, making generalizations about public charter schools nearly impossible. However, the *2009 Accountability Report* (Allen, Consoletti, & Kerwin, 2009) maintained charter schools across the nation were raising student achievement.

Charter school opponents claimed public charter schools were not held to the same regulations as public schools, therefore giving them an unfair advantage (Allen et al., 2009). However, 103 of 972 charter schools opened since 1992 were closed for failing to meet the expectations required by the state and their local authorizer (Allen et

al., 2009). Although charter schools were released from some federal and state accountability standards, they were responsible for addressing the state standards and administering the same state assessments. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2016) asserted charter schools' authorizers were responsible for holding the schools accountable to the same laws set forth for traditional public schools.

### **Parental Choice**

Public charter schools gained in popularity for years, but researchers found that was not solely because charters were of high quality. Villavicencio (2013), contended school choice being driven by school quality was a misconception. Parents chose schools for a variety of reasons. Kamenetz (2015) found parents ranked the academic achievement scores of a school ranked lower than other school attributes when choosing schools for their children.

Fisher (2010) argued parents chose charter schools over traditional public schools because they assumed the charter school would have a more positive impact on their child's learning. Fisher (2010) found parents thought charter schools were better than traditional public schools. Many parents liked the charter school teachers, and therefore thought those teachers were better than traditional public school teachers, thus leading them to believe charter school teachers provide higher quality instruction.

Bell (2005) proposed multiple factors steered parents toward one school over another. Bell (2005) emphasized parental choice was bound by the information about school choices available to parents. Parents used their social networks to obtain information from other parents, reviewed their child's grades to determine if they would qualify for a private school, and examined grades and feeder school patterns. For

example, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade parent unhappy at the current elementary school may not switch to the family's school of choice if that school also ends at 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The logic behind this type of thinking was not to disrupt the student for a year or two, just to send the student to a traditional middle school (Bell, 2005).

Bell (2005) reported a high percentage of parents with students attending low-achieving schools selected those schools. With plenty of schools to choose from, many parents simply did not take advantage of their options. The process of choosing schools differed for many parents. For example, some parents chose an average school closer to the home rather than an academically superior school further away. Understanding why parents did not select a good school was complicated because parents' definitions of a good school differed (Bell, 2005).

### **Charter School Facts and Myths**

Buckley and Schneider (2007) reported publicly funded charter schools were marketed as an education alternative promising better student achievement, greater parent satisfaction, and more vibrant school communities. Charter schools possessed many positive attributes and areas of needed improvement, but many stakeholders in public education lacked all the facts regarding public charter schools. Numerous myths surround public charter schools, ranging from financial and human capital resources, types of students served, performance and accountability, and the impact of charters on students and education as a whole.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2016) debunked critics' claims that charter schools only admitted the highest performing students from the local schools, lacked transparency related to finances, and hired less-qualified teachers. Creaming was

defined as selecting high-performing students and/or exiting low-performing students to keep a school's academic reputation intact. According to American School Choice (2017), charter schools should not be accused of creaming because many targeted underprivileged and minority students.

However, there were instances where some charter schools were justifiably investigated. For example, in 2010, a charter school in Alameda County was under investigation for fraud, mismanagement, and child endangerment (Warner, 2016). Parents claimed if there was more transparency, then the school leaders would have been unable to take advantage of the system (Warner, 2016). Another essential myth about public charter schools was that the employed uncertified teachers; however, these employees exhibited expertise in the curriculum and were accountable to the same standards of student performance (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Parents take many factors into account when choosing a charter school. According to Holley (2015), the charter school's reputation, curriculum, quality of teachers, and location were the top four attributes considered when deciding where to send their children. Other important attributes included ethnic composition and socioeconomic status, and whether the charter school offered extended hours, afterschool programs, or extracurricular activities (Holley, 2015).

### **The Charter's Appeal**

The appeal of public charter schools came in many forms. For some parents, the marketing of these schools lured parents in, while others were interested in charter schools because of their greater accountability to parents compared to traditional public

schools. According to Leayman (2016), greater parental involvement improved transparency; for example, at a school in Washington D.C. parents were encouraged to visit the school unannounced. Some charters created parent involvement contracts, requiring parents to volunteer for a given number of hours (Davis, 2013). The groups of people who started the charter school, usually including parents, had more autonomy in how they ran the school. “Since they don’t have to spend time dealing with ‘red tape,’ they are able to focus solely on excellence and setting higher goals and expectations for the students attending the charter school” (Why Choose Charter Schools, 2015, p. 2).

### **Educational Quality**

It was difficult to fairly gauge the educational quality of public charter schools because of the many variables to consider when assessing their worth. For example, in a study released by Stanford University’s Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO), Sanchez (2013) concluded that, on average, public charter school students did not outperform traditional public school students in reading and math. Similarly, RAND (2009) found public charter school students were generally performing on par with traditional public students in the areas of reading and math.

As explained by Blazer (2010), the wide variation in public charter school regulations, populations, school mission, and funding made it nearly impossible to accurately compare public charter schools and traditional public schools. The New York Daily News (Lestch, 2013) reported public charter schools and traditional public schools had equally dismal performance on state assessments, whereas, the Chicago Tribune (Chen, 2017) reported public charter schools were outperforming the traditional public schools in math and English.

## **Socioeconomic Status**

According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2016), public charter schools served approximately the same number of English learners as their traditional public school counterparts. “While teachers are the most important factor within schools, their efforts pale in comparison with those of students’ backgrounds, families, and other factors beyond the control of schools and teachers” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 5). Schneider (2016) maintained research showed a negative correlation between student academic performance and poverty; larger number of students receiving free- or reduced-price lunches equated to lower student achievement scores on standardized tests. Although public charter schools in California had an overall positive academic impact on Black students living in poverty, White students at the traditional public school had higher gains in reading and math (CREDO, 2014).

Opponents of charter schools noted some schools had their own admissions criteria, which resulted in racially and economically segregated schools. Quigley (2017) reported charter schools were highly segregated by race and economic status. Kliez et al. (2000) concluded ethnicity and income played a major role in how parents rated the important aspects of a school. Location and safety were more important to minority and low-income families than to White and high-income families. This was due in part to the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood in which they lived. School safety was more important to a family when more unsafe behaviors occurred around the school (Kliez et al., 2017).

According to Villavicencio (2013), many White and affluent families exited charter schools when the quality of the school decreased. However, Black and Latino



families were prone to stay at a struggling school because they feared another school might be worse (Villavicencio, 2013).

### **Class Size**

Parents and teachers alike ranked class size as one of the most important factors impacting academic achievement for students (Ravitch, 2013). Educators and lawmakers debated the class size dilemma for decades. According to Mosle (2013), annual surveys conducted by the New York City Department of Education determined parents believed smaller class sizes were more beneficial for their children than increased test preparation, more effective leadership, and more teacher training. Benefits of small class sizes included: academic gains for students, lower retention rates, stronger achievement scores, and fewer discipline problems (GreatSchools, 2015). Northwestern University Associate Professor Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach (2014) supported these claims in her research on class size. Schanzenbach (2014) stated low-income and minority children would reap the greatest benefit from smaller class sizes and would also suffer the most from learning in largely populated classrooms. Kliez et al. (2000) confirmed parents, regardless of their ethnicity, selected charter schools because of their smaller class sizes.

### **Parent Beliefs**

In a study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2013), researchers found parents wanted their children's education to focus on reading and math skills, critical thinking and communication skills, and the elements of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). Further, many of the attributes parents stated were important could only be found among schools of choice. For example, charter schools could offer specialized curricula, include a focus on the arts, and maintain smaller class sizes. Some parents

assigned high value to vocations or wanted their child's school to focus on citizenship. The study indicated African American parents were more likely to want a school that taught acceptance of diversity (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2013).

According to Parents Across America (2017), parents supported small class sizes and a well-rounded curriculum, along with diverse classrooms. More importantly, parents wanted positive, progressive reforms that worked. Another essential point was that parents opposed the expansion of charters. This parent group also concluded high-stakes testing, the lack of equitable funding, and the closing of schools did not benefit students (Parents Across America, 2017).

### **Effects of Charter Schools**

The creation of charter schools was supposed to provide a better education for all students, regardless of the type of school the student attended. "They were supposed to recruit the weakest students, the dropouts, and identify methods to help public schools do a better job with those who had lost interest in schooling, instead the charter industry is aggressive and entrepreneurial" (Ravitch, 2013, p. 2). The competition created by the addition of charter schools was supposed to make districts want to perform better to retain students. Gill (2016) highlighted the positive effects of charter schools, such as competitive pressure and the introduction of innovative approaches. Although many districts collaborated with local charters and implemented the charter school's strategies, some districts responded by creating obstacles for the formation of charter schools (Holley et al., 2013). Districts' obstructive practices included: excessive denial of charter applications, legal obstacles, delay of charter school payments, and withholding information from charter schools. In California, charter school advocates claimed

districts were noncompliant with Proposition 39, which required districts to provide reasonable space for charter schools to hold classes (Holley et al., 2013).

Although many of the nation's best charter schools implemented innovative strategies, new technology, and collaborative atmospheres, attending charter schools did not guarantee student success. "Many charter schools perform no better than district-run schools on state reading and math exams" (Pearson, Nolan, & Chapman, 2014, p. 2).

### **Student Achievement**

The ongoing debate regarding student achievement of students in public charter schools versus students in traditional public schools had researchers find evidence to support their claims, whether for or against either side. Advocates produced research highlighting the successes of charter schools, whereas critics highlighted charter school insufficiencies. Blazer (2010) noted it was difficult to ascertain quality information regarding student achievement because of differing student populations, flawed methodologies, and varying state laws regarding teachers and funding, and because many of the research findings reported were from biased evaluators. Ravitch (2013) explained in their quest for higher test scores, many public charter school leaders limited the number of English learners and students with disabilities, although the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2016) disputed this claim.

Student reading and math achievement levels of charter school students varied from state to state and from school to school. According to Blazer (2010), most studies concluded public charter schools scored about the same, if not lower than their traditional public school counterparts, on math and reading achievement scores. Bifulco and Ladd (2006) echoed this sentiment, stating students made considerably smaller achievement

gains, but noted the high rates of student turnover as a possible explanation. Pearson et al. (2014) concluded charter school academic achievement spanned the entire spectrum. Despite freedom to innovative, smaller class sizes, and less bureaucracy, they still only performed on par with their local traditional counterparts (Pearson et al., 2014). Some proponents of charter schools argued the evidence supporting the lack of charter school achievement was flawed, whereas opponents of charter schools claimed the charters' success was attributed to unfair practices such as choosing only high achieving students, not admitting special education students, and not comparing demographically similar schools (Honig, 2016).

CREDO (2014) produced a report on the performance of charter schools in California, stating 32% of charter schools had significantly higher learning gains than traditional public schools. "Between 2010 and 2013, 15 of 16 independent studies found students attending charter schools do better academically than their traditional school peers" (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016, p. 8). However, the study also illustrated charter schools throughout California served a lower percentage of English learners and special education students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016).

### **Threat to Local Schools**

The education of children was considered a public responsibility throughout the United States. The findings from various researchers regarding academic success of charter school students was inconsistent over the years. Berends et al. (2008) suggested increasing the validity and reliability of one's findings by implementing the following criteria when comparing schools:

1. Select schools that test at least 95% of their students
2. Match schools that cover the same grade levels
3. Use the school's previous test scores as the baseline to mark growth
4. Match schools with similar racial-ethnic compositions
5. Match schools with similar socioeconomic compositions
6. Select schools located in districts that allow choice
7. Match schools geographically close to each other

The implementation of the matching criteria would ensure schools were compared with others that mirror their composition (Berends et al., 2008).

### **Financial Implications**

In their research on the competitive effects of charter schools on traditional public schools, Arsen and Ni (2015) found competition for students created an annual loss of revenue based on lower ADA. Complementary to this, Chokshi (2013) noted the Philadelphia school district's finances were burdened by charter schools, stating "In 2003, the Philadelphia district spent 7.9% of its general fund on charters. By fiscal year 2012, the schools absorbed 23.7% of the fund" (p. 1). Currently, the federal government spends over \$330 million helping charter schools expand and replicating successful charter school techniques and strategies (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, 2017).

### **Impact on Local Districts**

Charter schools impacted local school districts; however, researchers disagreed on the type and significance of the impact (Arsen & Ni, 2015). Although most studies focused on comparing student achievement scores between charter school students and

traditional public school students, other factors affected impact. According to Cordes (2014), little research examined how charter schools affected the finances of traditional public schools in the same neighborhood. Conversely, the pressure from charter schools could prompt district leaders to improve their schools to compete with local charters (Davis, 2013).

Charter schools had some positive effects on traditional public schools. Fryer (2014) found implementing best practices from charter schools increased the level of student achievement in math among traditional public school students in Houston. The charter school best practices implemented included lengthening the school day and year to provide students increased instructional time, and improving human capital by making personnel changes. This included changes in pay and training, and the reallocation of teachers and administrators. Additionally, tutors were provided during regular instructional time to provide more differentiation within the classroom, interim assessments were mandated to guide instructional practice, and clear expectations were set to instill a culture of high expectations. “These results provide evidence suggesting charter school best practices can be used systematically in previously low-performing traditional public schools to significantly increase student achievement in ways similar to the most achievement-increasing charter schools” (Fryer, 2014, p. 45). The evidence presented by Gill (2016) supported Fryer’s findings, indicating charter schools had an indirect effect on students who remained in traditional public schools.

### **Effective School Conditions**

Finland and Korea lack public charter schools, yet their students consistently performed among the highest in the world; thus, it could be concluded charter schools

were not the only option that should be considered when reforming education (Ravitch, 2013). Ravitch (2013) explained doing what worked was the key to a successful public education system. What worked was strong early childhood education, smaller class sizes, rigorous curriculum, after-school activities, less standardized testing, and support personnel in the form of counselors, librarians, and social workers. Complementary to this, Pearson et al. (2014) found longer school days, higher expectations, and closer attention to individual students had a positive effect on the academic achievement of charter school students in New York City. Berends et al. (2008) suggested,

It may be, for example, that schools of choice (e.g., charter, magnet, private) with certain curricula alignment and data-focused instructional strategies are highly effective, while choice schools without these specific conditions, or those that allow teachers to be completely autonomous in their individual classrooms, are not very effective. (p. 247)

### **Charter School Challenges**

Although the number of charter schools and students enrolled continued to grow, challenges in establishing public charter schools were experienced. Many public charter school leaders had difficulty with aspects of charter school development, including replicating effective schools, recruiting talented teachers, acquiring resources, obtaining qualified leaders, and managing tensions between charters and traditional public schools (Higgins & Hess, 2009). Other charter school challenges include replicating successful charter schools and maintaining the support of charter advocates. Maintaining support was difficult among allegations that charter schools financially hurt local schools, lacked

transparency and accountability, were susceptible to fraud, and lacked academic achievement (Higgins & Hess, 2009).

Financial strains also had a negative impact on the quality of teachers and retaining teachers in public charter schools. Murphy (2014) found that at one charter schools, the teachers earned \$10,000 less and had 7 years less experience than teachers in the local public school district. Another essential point was half of the charter school teachers had less than five years teaching experience (Murphy, 2014).

Raymond (2014) found it was difficult to resolve the public charter school versus traditional public school performance debate because of the varying types of charter schools and their inconclusive findings. Recent studies recognized both academically successful charter schools and equally successful traditional public schools. Ravitch (2013) concluded both advocates and opponents of charter schools filtered out evidence and only focused on the data that supported their standpoint. Charter school were also accused of creaming or only admitting selected students. Cohen (2017) reported English learners accounted for 15% of Bridgeport, Connecticut's student population; however, Capital Prep Charter School did not enroll any English learners. Public charter schools could be shut down for not meeting specified academic goals, which could result in practices such as creaming (Vanacore, 2016).

According to Higgins and Hess (2009), public charter schools had pockets of success; however, efforts to reproduce the same level of achievement at other schools was in vain. To elaborate, evidence showed replicating the most promising educational programs was ineffective because of differing clientele, staff, and the availability of resources (Higgins & Hess, 2009). Equally important was the challenge for charter



schools to maintain the support of African Americans families who comprised a significant portion of charter school students. However, Bryant (2016) reported the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), along with smaller organizations across the United States, called for an end of charter school expansions. To elaborate, the NAACP wanted better oversight of charter schools and more transparency (Bryan, 2016). According to Strauss (2016), charter school opponents thought the advocates were trying to privatize education and drain the funding provided to traditional public schools.

In a report by the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (2014), *A Reflection on the Challenges for Minnesota's Charter School Movement*, the authorizer board identified potential threats to the state's charter school movement. They concluded a significant threat was the limited effectiveness of governing boards. Ineffective governing boards could involve weak leadership, inadequate training, or irresponsible decision-making. The report also suggested charter school administrators who lacked the capacity to lead could have their schools closed, which shed a negative light on the charter school movement and could result in state-induced restrictions. Another threat to the charter school movement was authorizers holding schools accountable and revoking their charters, which again could result in tighter state legislation. Lastly, the lack of political engagement by charter school advocates at a state and federal levels acted as a hindrance to the charter school movement because their absence allowed others to make important decisions (Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, 2014).

## **Summary**

This literature review discussed aspects of public charter schools and how they compared to aspects of traditional public schools. These public charter school features ranged from their history and performance, to what they offered and their popularity. For more than two decades, the public school narrative was burdened with negative connotations. According to Ravitch (2010), charter school advocates promoted public education as a failed enterprise, citing bad teachers, financial mismanagement, and low tests scores as their evidence. On the other hand, opponents of charter schools claimed they hurt public education financially and performed no better than traditional public schools. Parents wanted a great education for their children; however, biased research and stakeholders with their own agendas clouded the evidence needed to make informed choices.

Ray Budde's idea of a charter school, which focused on empowering teachers to be innovative as a way of restructuring education, blossomed into a highly debatable form of education. Since its inception in Minnesota in 1992, the number of charter schools grew to over 6,000 across 42 states (Junge, 2014). Charter schools were one of the fastest growing schools of choice throughout the nation (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006).

Although public charter schools must follow state guidelines, they are more autonomous than traditional public schools. This granted school leaders innovative freedom regarding the curriculum, strategies, technology, and time teachers spent with students. Public charter schools were still held accountable by an authorizer responsible for ensuring the school adhered to previously agreed upon criteria and made adequate student achievement progress. Many public charter schools offered a specific curricular

focus, such as technology or performing arts. Numerous schools also provided an extended day and extended year, which appealed to parents. Charter schools receiving public funds were open to any family willing to provide transportation for their child to attend the school.

Although research showed families flocked to public charter schools, other school choice options were available. Public charter school competition included private schools, magnet schools, and other subcategories of schools. Parents who kept their children in a traditional public school made a choice to do so. A primary difference between public schools and private school was the cost associated with private schools. Private schools also often lacked special education programs and required different certifications for their teachers (Pascual, 2017). Traditional public schools were funded through state and federal government dollars and thus followed a more rigid curriculum (Chen, 2017). Charter schools were provided more flexibility, but were also held accountable for academic achievement and could be closed for not meeting performance targets.

Charter school supporters claimed the mere existence of charter schools provided competition for traditional public schools, which motivated local school districts to improve the quality of their schools. Davis (2013) reported insufficient evidence existed to support this claim. Many researchers, including RAND (2009), Carnoy et al. (2005), and Arsen and Ni (2015), all agreed charter schools in proximity to traditional public schools did not alone make the traditional public school better.

According to Bell (2005), one reason parents selected schools was being unaware of all the options available. Another factor included the parental values; research

suggested families had lists of determining factors they considered when deciding where to send their child to school.

Numerous negative myths surround public charter schools, ranging from lack of financial transparency to poor performance and accountability. However, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2016) debunked critics' claims about handpicking students and lack of transparency. CREDO (2014) found African American students in California had larger academic growth at charter schools, whereas White students had higher growth at traditional public schools. Blazer (2010) and Bifulco and Ladd (2006) concluded there was no significant difference in the achievement level of students at public charter schools and traditional public schools.

In conclusion, parents have many education options to choose from regarding schooling their children. Charter schools were growing in popularity and offered a variety of options traditional public schools did not, although those extra options did not guarantee increased academic achievement. Many parents were swayed by the hype surrounding charter schools because of marketing strategies (Ravitch, 2010). Parents assumed charter schools would have a positive impact on their children; however, charter schools faced challenges as well. To be considered successful, charter schools had to contend with challenges related to retaining teachers, acquiring resources, replicating successful strategies, and maintaining the support of its advocates and authorizing agency. In short, it was not whether charter schools were better than traditional public schools, but under which conditions, regardless of the type of school, produced the highest achieving students (Berends, 2015).

Chapter II provided a review of the literature pertinent to school choice and charter schools. Chapter III presents the methodology used to conduct this study. Chapter IV details the data collected and findings derived from the data. Chapter V provides a discussion of the findings, along with implications for action and recommendations for future studies.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Chapter III describes the research design used to explore why parents chose a charter school as opposed to a traditional public school. Chapter III begins with a brief introduction providing the reader with a frame of reference for the study, including reiterating the purpose and research questions. Next, the qualitative design is explained in detail, including the population, sample, and instruments. This chapter concludes with a summary of the methodological portion of the study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the attributes of public charter schools considered important for the selection of a charter school as perceived by the parents of charter school students. A second purpose of this study was to identify the sources parents used to inform their decision to enroll their child in a charter school.

### **Research Questions**

1. What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?
2. What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before deciding to enroll their student in a charter school?

### **Research Design**

The purpose of a research design is to develop a plan for administering all aspects of a study, including selecting participants and data collection procedures (Patton, 2015). The research design of this study was a general qualitative analysis of the reasons why parents chose public charter schools over traditional public schools. Qualitative research,

as stated by Roberts (2010), tells a detailed story from the participant's point of view. This qualitative methodology was chosen because it "inquires into, documents, and interprets the meaning-making process" (Patton, 2015, p. 3). The goal of this study was to determine the reasons why parents made a particular choice, hence the choice of the qualitative inquiry. Patton (2015) also stated qualitative analysis involved finding meaningful patterns and themes, which were of the utmost importance when interpreting data.

This study utilized interviewing as the method for soliciting data from the participants. According to Patton (2015), surveys yielded shallow results whereas interviews allowed participants to tell stories and reflect on their experiences. Open-ended and semi-structured interview questions allowed participants to respond in detail about their experiences (Patton, 2002). The researcher petitioned parents from local public charter schools to participate in interviews.

### **Population**

In *The Dissertation Journey* by Carol M. Roberts (2010), the population was referenced as the researcher's group of interest. The population of this study was parents with children who attended a public charter school in San Bernardino County. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) proposed a population was the entire group upon which the results of the research would be generalized. According to the California Department of Education (2017), over 602,00 students attend one of 1,248 charter schools in the state.

### **Target Population**

Based on the ideas of Creswell and Plano (2011), a target population was defined as the entire group of individuals upon which the data would be used to make inferences.

Similarly, Mertens (2015) stated the target population was the group the researcher was going to study. The population was identified as parents with children attending one of the 1,248 charter schools in the state of California, and the target population was the parents of the 26,158 students attending one of the 38 charter schools in San Bernardino County (CDE, 2017).

### **Sample**

A sample is a portion of the total population in which a researcher is interested in studying. “When you don’t have an opportunity to study an entire group, select a sample as representative as possible of the total group in which you are interested” (Roberts, 2010, p. 149). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) concluded researchers must define the sampling frame before selecting participants. The sample consisted of 15 parents from three public charter schools within two different school districts in San Bernardino County. The two participating districts had charter schools identified as being able to participate in the case study. Parents from each of the participating school districts were interviewed in a private, comfortable setting of their choice. The criteria for parents to be eligible for this study were:

- The parent had at least one child who attended a public charter school
- The public charter school was located within San Bernardino County
- The school recommended the parents to participate
- The parent was willing to participate and sign an informed consent form

### **Sample Selection Process**

The sample for this study included parents of students attending 3 of the 38 public charter schools within the county of San Bernardino. The researcher combined sampling



methods to obtain the best representation of the desired population. A nonprobability sample was noted for its efficient and inexpensive design (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Nonprobability sampling does not include random sampling and was chosen for its ease of use. Nonprobability sampling allowed the researcher to select participants at the school sites and accept recommendations from the school staff. The researcher's connection to the district leaders allowed access to participants who were recommended by school personnel. Purposeful sampling representative draws individuals with information about the topic of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) maintained purposeful sample should be used to select participants with similar qualities. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to easily identify participants who met the criteria. The researcher used purposeful sampling because it helped to provide a more accurate representation of the population. The intended outcome was to find participants who met the criteria and could be interviewed in a timely fashion. The researcher selected 15 participants to interview using the criteria previously discussed. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the important information coming from the respondents was based on quality rather than quantity.

### **Instrumentation**

Interviews allow a researcher to fully understand the participant's experiences (Mertens, 2015). The instrument used to collect data in this qualitative study was a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B). Mertens (2015) explained interviews were the best method of collecting information when a researcher wanted to fully understand someone's experiences. Semi-structured questions allow for flexibility and fewer restrictions on the information the participant wanted to share (RAND, 2009). The

instrument collected data about why parents had chosen a public charter school as opposed to a traditional public school.

The proper placement of questions, coupled with efficient probing, provides the researcher with in-depth responses regarding the topic (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher used the literature synthesis matrix (Appendix A) and an alignment table (Appendix C) to assure the interview questions were aligned to the research questions. “Researchers sometimes start with more informal interviewing strategies to establish a relationship with the participant” (Mertens, 2015, p. 384). The interview questions and interview process were field tested to ensure the instrument would produce valid and reliable results. An expert panel, consisting of two experts who conducted qualitative research and earned doctorate degrees helped analyze and refine the interview questions and the interview process.

The researcher is known as an instrument when conducting qualitative research; therefore, the researcher must remain impartial or risk contaminating the study (Patten, 2012). The interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded with a nonintrusive recording device. The researcher asked all participants the same questions, using additional clarifying questions when needed. The researcher’s goal was to not influence the responses of the participant. Patten (2012) also concluded the researcher makes firsthand observations of activities and interactions, and can be an active participant by conducting formalized interviews. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) agreed the researcher should remain neutral, probing at times, but not asking leading questions. Therefore, as an instrument of the study, it was important for researchers to remain unbiased during the interview and analysis, as not to misinterpret the data (Patton, 2012).

The interviews were recorded using an online application called Rev, which records interviews specifically for transcription services. Taking abbreviated notes and having the recordings transcribed, as opposed to writing verbatim, allowed the researcher to concentrate on what was being said and fully engage with the participant.

## **Reliability and Validity**

### **Reliability**

According to Patten (2012), reliability was defined as a test that consistently yields the same results. As Roberts (2010) suggested, an investigation would be reliable if the participants were asked questions that addressed the purpose of the research. The researcher used the interview protocol (Appendix B) to ensure each participant was interviewed in the same manner. The items designed for the instrument aligned with the research questions to ensure all variables were addressed.

### **Field Test**

The researcher conducted a field test of the interview protocol to increase reliability, as suggested by Jacob and Furgerson (2012). Roberts (2010) proposed field testing allowed researchers to make judgments about the validity of an instrument. The researcher conducted the field test to unearth biases and preserve the integrity of the study. Before conducting interviews, a field test was used to ensure the questions were appropriate and to assess the needed length of an interview. A parent who met the sample criteria, but was not in the sample, was selected to participate in the field test. An expert with a doctoral degree in the education field and extensive experience analyzing qualitative data was an observer during the field test interview. The expert and participant were asked for feedback regarding the interview questions as well as the

interviewing technique. The researcher adjusted the interview questions and procedures based on this feedback.

### **Validity**

Although there are different types of validity, Patten (2012) argued a protocol was valid if it accurately measured what it was designed to measure. With that in mind, the questions were developed with the purpose of the research as its foundation. The questions were piloted and revised according to the suggestions of an expert panel. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants to thoroughly answer the interview questions. The pilot test confirmed the questions and procedures were valid.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) expressed that the validity of qualitative designs depended upon how consistent the researcher's interpretations agreed with the respondent's intended meanings. To increase the design validity, the researcher employed the following strategies:

1. Expert panel review
2. Participant review
3. Member checking using probing questions

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected via face-to-face interviews. The data collection process involved receiving permission from Brandman University Institute Review Board (IRB) prior to any data collection. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) stated, "Permission needs to be sought from multiple individuals and levels in organizations, such as individuals in charge of sites, from people providing data...and from campus-based institutional review boards (IRBs) to collect data from individuals and sites" (p. 175). The goal of the IRB

was to ensure the rights of the participants were protected, and that the research was conducted with integrity and complied with applicable laws and policies. All participants were required to sign an informed consent (Appendix D) acknowledging their willingness to participate in the study.

The researcher employed McMillan and Schumacher's (2010) five data collection phases as the basis for gathering data. During the first phase, planning, the interview questions were designed to solicit answers that addressed the research questions. The interview questions were also piloted and assessed by a qualified investigator of qualitative research. Mertens (2015) suggested implementing a prototype to gauge the quality of the information obtained and gather information about the reliability and validity of the instrument. Phase two involved building a relationship with the participants, gaining trust, and revising the interview protocol based on the field test. In phase three as the researcher started data collection, preliminary categories for themes were created based on the incoming data. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified phase four as turning the focus from interviewing participants to identifying emergent findings. The fifth phase required the researcher to present the data via diagrams, charts, and other types of graphics (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Phase two of McMillan and Schumacher's (2010) data collection plan was the sample selection phase. The researcher implemented the following steps to contact potential participants, gain their agreement to participate, and schedule the interviews:

1. The researcher contacted site principals at the qualifying charter schools to gain their participation and request recommendations for parent participation.

2. The principal provided recommended parents the letter of invitation and encouraged them to contact the researcher via email or by phone.
3. Once contacted, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, asked for their verbal approval to participate, and set up an interview time.
4. After initial contact, a follow-up email was sent to each participant confirming the time and place of the interview. The researcher also attached the interview questions (Appendix B), informed consent form and Participant Bill of Rights (Appendix D).
5. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher reviewed the informed consent and asked the participant sign indicating their understanding and agreement to participate.

The researcher used the interview protocol (Appendix B) asking each question in order with additional probes as needed. To ensure accuracy, the researcher recorded each interview, engaged in abbreviated note taking during the interview, and invited participants to review the transcript of their recorded interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis was used to analyze the data collected during the interviews. “Qualitative analysis is primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among the categories” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 367). After collecting the data, the data were then scrutinized to explore the findings of the study.

Data organization was described as essential to a researcher’s analysis of the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher administered each interview and

reviewed all the transcriptions. Reviewing transcriptions multiple times strengthened researchers' analysis (Mertens, 2015). The transcribed data from the interviews were reviewed and then uploaded into Excel. Excel software allowed the researcher to compare data and identify themes. The researcher generated specific codes and themes, and then used comparative methods to find similarities and differences. As Roberts (2010) suggested, the researcher completed an initial reading of the transcripts, sorted and grouped the responses, coded the transcripts of each respondent, reported the findings of patterns and themes, and then reviewed the findings to check for consistency with the data. Similarly, McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated researchers should identify segments, analyze these segments into meaningful codes, compare and refine codes, and then form categories or groups of codes. After identifying patterns in the data, the researcher made general statements relating to the research question.

### **Interrater Reliability**

Interrater reliability used an expert to re-code and analyze the consistency in the codes to increase reliability (Patton, 2015). Both Creswell (2003) and Roberts (2010) agreed researcher-created instruments needed to be reviewed by qualified personnel. For this study, an experienced qualitative researcher with a doctorate degree and experience with analyzing interview transcripts using Excel software was used to independently analyze and code 10% of the data. The researcher and expert then met to compare the independent analyses. They had an 80% or greater match and determined there was interrater reliability.

## **Limitations**

As explained by Roberts (2010), all studies have limitations based on features of the study that negatively affect the findings. The interview was administered to parents who were willing to provide the researcher with feedback about their experiences. Parents who felt strongly about their experiences may be more apt to volunteer compared to parents with negative experiences; they may have inadvertently skewed the data toward those with more positive experiences. Another limitation was the fact only three charter schools were selected for inclusion in the study; however, it was not feasible to expand the geographical location of the research due to time and financial constraints. With the limited location of the study, the findings could not be generalized to other counties or regions. Additionally, charter schools have different foci, along with variation in the number of students enrolled in each school. Charter school size may or may not be a factor in the experiences that influenced the parental responses.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented a rationale for why a qualitative approach was used in this study. After stating the purpose and research questions, the design of the study was presented. The chapter then addressed the population and sample, and why the instruments were chosen. The data collection and analysis procedures were also described. The limitations were stated to acknowledge the potential weaknesses of the study. Chapter IV follows with an in-depth discussion of the findings. Chapter V summarizes the findings and offers suggestions for future research.



## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

This chapter reviews the purpose, research questions, and methodology of the study. It summarizes the data collected by the researcher on the attributes and sources of information most important to parents when selecting a charter school. First, it individually summarizes the data collected from each of the 15 participants interviewed, and it summarizes the aggregate themes that emerged from the overall data analysis.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the attributes of public charter schools considered important for the selection of a charter school as perceived by the parents of charter school students. A second purpose of this study was to identify the sources parents used to inform their decision to enroll their child in a charter school.

### **Research Questions**

1. What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?
2. What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before deciding to enroll their student in a charter school?

### **Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

This was a qualitative case study used to determine why San Bernardino County charter school parents chose public charter schools over traditional public schools. The investigator interviewed 15 parents who met the following criteria:

- The parent had at least one child who attended a public charter school
- The public charter school was located within San Bernardino County

- The school recommended the parents to participate
- The parent was willing to participant and sign an informed consent form

The researcher gathered participants via recommendations from associates in the school district. He provided them with the purpose of the study, described the time commitment required, and described the criteria participants needed to meet. The researcher accepted 15 participants who agreed to participate and confirmed they met the criteria.

The researcher scheduled a face-to-face interview with each participant and followed the semi structured interview protocol (Appendix B) consisting of nine main questions with optional follow-up questions. Table 2 shows the alignment of each of the interview questions to the study's research questions. All participants were provided with the informed consent form and the Brandman University Bill of Rights (Appendix D), which explains the rights of the participant.

Table 2

*Alignment of Interview Questions to Research Questions*

Research Question	Corresponding interview questions
What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	Questions 1, 2, 3, 3a
What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

After gaining consent from the participants, the researcher recorded the interviews with a cell phone app called Rev. The recordings were later transcribed by Rev and analyzed by the researcher for themes that answered the research questions. To establish

reliability in scoring, the researcher asked a colleague with a doctorate and prior research experience to code a sample of the interview data to compare it to his own coding patterns. A high degree of similarity between the researcher's coding and the colleague ensured interrater reliability with respect to the data analysis.

### **Population**

The population of this study was parents with children attending one of the 1,248 charter schools in the state of California. The target population was the parents of the 26,158 students attending one of the 38 charter schools in San Bernardino County (CDE, 2017).

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 15 parents from three public charter schools within two different school districts in San Bernardino County. Parents from each of the two participating school districts were interviewed in a private, comfortable setting of their choice. Of the 15 participants, 10 were from San Bernardino and 5 were from Victorville. Additionally, 11 participants were female and 4 were male.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

#### **Data Analysis by Participant**

**Participant A.** Participant A spoke at length about the importance of teachers nurturing the students. He stated they chose the school because it “had a focus on being culturally responsive” and would meet the needs of African American students. He described data showing, “Black boys tend to be the most disengaged, the most penalized, and receive the most negative student discipline.” Participant A also emphasized the importance of having high quality teachers, who were nurturing and could “extend his learning and

differentiate for him.” Participant A spoke of teachers who created “positive, warm relationships” and the need for a community feel at the school site. “It really comes down to the three R’s: rigor, relevance, and relationships, stated Participant A as he tried to sum up why he selected the school.

Participant A also discussed the importance of a being involved in the school’s planning process. Since this was a new school, there was limited information about it online. However, Participant A attended numerous planning meetings. As an educator, living in the community, he was intricately involved in discussions about the vision and direction of the school, noting, “I remember just going to hearings at that building and just seeing the community come out. Everyone was extremely passionate for a charter school that would cater to African Americans.” Table 3 shows the themes identified from the interview with Participant A.

Table 3

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant A*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-quality teachers</li> <li>• Nurturing teachers</li> <li>• Rigor, relevance, and relationship</li> <li>• Diverse programs/curriculum</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning meetings</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• School/staff vision</li> </ul>

**Participant B.** One of the most commonly discussed areas with Participant B was full-day kindergarten. She noted it was important for a full-time employee to have the option of the regular school day. When asked about the decision to select a charter school, she stated, “In all honesty, they had a full-day kindergarten. That was pretty

much it.” Although she believed high test scores, rigid standards, and high expectations were important, she reiterated the full-day kindergarten and aftercare until 7pm were the strongest attributes of the charter school.

Participant B described how she researched school websites and publications for test scores and programs to determine which school to send her student. “I saw the test scores. The numbers don’t lie.” Participant B said she talked with dozens of parents and felt comfortable because of all the positivity. She referred to the outcome of their mission statement and was impressed by the school’s aim for students. Not being influenced by the news media, Participant B utilized friends and neighbors, and believed in the school’s mission statement, to aid in her decision to select this school. Table 4 summarizes the themes described by Participant B.

Table 4

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant B*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High test scores</li> <li>• High standards/expectations for students</li> <li>• Full-day kindergarten</li> <li>• After-care until 7pm</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Word of mouth</li> <li>• Mission statement</li> </ul>

**Participant C.** Much of the discussion with Participant C focused on class size. She believed students received a higher quality education if the class size was reduced. She stated, “I think the charters are more able to give a scholar more one-on-one teaching

versus...a class at max capacity.” She also felt as though the teachers at the charter school were more qualified than teachers at traditional public schools.

Participant C also discussed the importance of what parents who had children at the charter school said about their experiences. She had friends whose children did well and were impressed with the school. This participant asked friends and parents with students at the school about the school’s effectiveness.

Participant C used the internet as a major source of information on charter schools. “I’ve seen the positives of seeing what’s on social media from other parents.” She mentioned always being on Facebook, and the internet and social media played a major role in her decision to exit the traditional public school system. “Sometimes in the traditional media you hear negative things about the public school. They’ve been bashing the public schools, whether it’s true or not.” Table 5 lists the themes that emerged from the interview with Participant C.

Table 5

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant C*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High standards/expectations</li> <li>• Smaller class size</li> <li>• Diverse programs/curriculum</li> <li>• High-quality teachers</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Word of mouth</li> <li>• Media (social media, news, pamphlets)</li> </ul>

**Participant D.** Participant D shared a school’s reputation was paramount when she was searching for a charter school. She mentioned the importance of class size and how the school needs to high-quality, but each statement related back to the school’s

reputation. For example, she stated teachers could devote more attention individual needs with smaller class sizes and supported the statement with information received from other parents. “You can have a lot of information and statistics down on paper, but when you actually have people who are in your community who can vouch for the school, that means a lot.”

Participant D explicitly stated the school’s reputation was the deciding factor in how she chose the charter school. This was in direct relation to word-of-mouth being a major source of information gathering. She also used the internet to discover the school’s ratings, scores, and reviews. Participant D utilized ratings and test scores; however, the most important was word-of-mouth because “there’s a story behind the data.”

Participant D indicated the media minimally influenced her decision to select a charter school. A lot of things happen in high schools, in terms of what they’re exposed to...drugs, fighting, teacher arrests.” The traditional public high schools constantly received negative press and Participant D did not hear the same about charters. Table 6 lists the themes that emerged from the interview with Participant D.

Table 6

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant D*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-quality teachers</li> <li>• Class size</li> <li>• Reputation</li> <li>• Positive environment</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word-of-mouth</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Traditional media</li> <li>• Social media</li> </ul>

**Participant E.** Participant E shared several attributes he believed were important when selecting a charter school. These attributes included: smaller class size, uniforms, classes in the arts, and an assortment of curricular/enrichment related options. He explained above all else, the variety of enrichment programs was key in his decision to enroll his child. He was particularly interested in the flexible learning groups and the STEM academies.

Participant E suggested traditional public schools offered a one-size-fits-all type of education whereas the charter school allowed choices. “I want my child to be challenged at his level and given the opportunity to expound upon his learning through various learning options.” He said he knew his child is learning because of the different modalities the charter school used to support learning.

After researching what was offered within the district, Participant E visited charter schools in the area to explore his options. These visits provided insight to the schools’ ability to communicate, how they treated staff and students, and the culture, and offered a chance to see the various programs firsthand. Participant E did not allow the traditional media to influence his decision; however, he did take into consideration the opinions of parents experienced with the charter school. Table 7 lists the themes that emerged from the interview with Participant E.



Table 7

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant E*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class size</li> <li>• Diverse programs/curriculum</li> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• Nurturing atmosphere</li> <li>• Choice and individualization</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School visits</li> <li>• Word-of-mouth</li> <li>• Mission and vision statements</li> </ul>

**Participant F.** Participant F stated the reputation of the school and perception the atmosphere created were the main reasons she selected a charter school. She was not looking for a charter school; however, after internet research and speaking with other charter school parents “it just seemed like a good idea.” She also suggested most other parents probably used the school’s reputation as most important attribute, but being an educator gave her an advantage of knowing what to look for in a charter school.

Although Participant F utilized the internet as a means of researching charter schools, she believed the most important source of information came from the parents of children attending the charter school. Whether it was community members discussing the school or reading parent reviews of the site, the reputation of the school, from a parental perspective, held the most weight.

Participant F confirmed traditional media played a major role in her decision to choose a charter school. “The negative attention that it gets on the traditional media makes parents believe that their schools are not safe.” Consequently, she understood “it’s a mixed bag,” as all charter schools were different and may not be better than the local

public school. Table 8 provides a summary of themes that emerged from the interview with Participant F.

Table 8

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant F*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive environment</li> <li>• Safety</li> <li>• Reputation</li> <li>• Test scores</li> <li>• School reviews/ratings</li> <li>• Look/perception of school</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word of mouth</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Billboards, banners, community meetings</li> <li>• Media (social media, news, pamphlets)</li> </ul>

**Participant G.** Participant G explained her daughter had issues with bullying and self-esteem, and how the public school did not address the issues properly. She believed the strength of the structures, coupled with caring adults, made the charter school a place where her children flourished. Part of the school structure was requiring students to wear uniforms, which Participant G said helped to curb the bullying. “Everybody looked the same, so whether you were poor or rich, it didn’t matter.”

Class size and programs were two other areas Participant G mentioned. She shared she liked the smaller class sizes because there could be more one-on-one time with students who needed it. She stated the charter had behavior modifications integrated into the curriculum. “If my student didn’t complete her assignment, when she came back the next day, she had consequences.”

Participant G shared media was a major influence in her decision to select a charter school. Between the negative press and family and friends' unfavorable views of public school, Participant G decided to avoid traditional public schools. Talking to other parents was the most important source of collecting information. She conducted internet research, but said the "internet just gives you cold facts, but it doesn't give you personal experiences." See Table 9 for a summary of themes identified from Participant G.

Table 9

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant G*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse programs/curriculum</li> <li>• Class size</li> <li>• Positive environment</li> <li>• Nurturing teachers</li> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• Structure and accountability</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word-of-mouth</li> <li>• School visits</li> <li>• School interview (before enrolling)</li> <li>• Media (social media, news, pamphlets)</li> </ul>

**Participant H.** Participant H stated he selected the charter school it was above average compared to public schools. He identified teacher autonomy and student uniforms as reasons why it was better than traditional public schools. Other attributes that influenced his decision were mandatory parent participation hours, the community-like atmosphere, and smaller class sizes.

Internet research and school visits were two ways Participant H gathered information. The internet was utilized to check ratings and test scores, and school visits granted him an opportunity to get a feel for the school. However, he relied on the

experiences of other charter school parents the most before making his decision. “When I went to visit the school, I talked to other parents. That was most important for me.”

The traditional news media did not influence his decision to select a charter school. “I didn’t see any negative news media or positive news media on this particular charter school.” Participant H mentioned the positive community of the school and location, as it related to safety, as influencing his decision to enroll in this charter. Table 10 provides a summary of themes that emerged from the interview with Participant H.

Table 10

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant H*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Above average scores (vs public school)</li> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• Teacher autonomy</li> <li>• Parent involvement</li> <li>• Positive environment</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location/safety</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Word of mouth</li> <li>• School visits</li> </ul>

**Participant I.** Participant I identified attributes such as smaller class size, higher teacher quality, and a schedule with fewer days off than the traditional public school. She described the smaller class size and smaller school in general as having better relationships between the staff and students and staff and parents. “Now that they’re in a charter school, it seems more like a family.” She stated having fewer students in the classroom helped eliminate bullying because the teacher had better control.

Regarding sources of information, Participant I shared she was influenced by the positive charter school experience of her neighbors. Facebook posts, school reviews on

the internet, and her own web searches of local schools supported her decision to select the charter school. Other than social media, the news media in general had no influence in her selection of this charter school.

Finally, Participant I, like other participants, emphasized the importance of feeling part of the community. “I feel like the teacher knows me; she knows my kid.” Overall, the combination of smaller class sizes, more days in school, parent reviews, and discussions with neighbors prompted Participant I to enroll her children in this specific charter school. Table 11 provides a summary of themes from Participant I.

Table 11

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant I*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-quality teacher</li> <li>• Schedule that matches parent work</li> <li>• Class size</li> <li>• Positive environment</li> <li>• More homework</li> <li>• Fewer days off</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word-of-mouth</li> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>

**Participant J.** The conversation with Participant J centered on a charter school helping her children better than traditional public schools. Her children were falling behind academically and she wanted a change. Participant J stated, “I’m tired of them scoring low.” After hearing about the success of a neighbor’s daughter, she decided to send her children to the local charter school.

Participant J also spoke to the smaller class size as being a motivator for enrolling her children in the charter school. Participant J said she was impressed by the small class

size and seeing children wearing uniforms. Crowded classrooms at the local public school steered her away. She added her daughter informed her of not having enough supplies at the traditional public school, saying, “there were 40 kids in the room and telling them that they all have to just share.”

Participant J described the public schools in San Bernardino as being “messed up.” She added, “Every now and then they send you home those papers and they tell you that the school is not scoring good.” Participant J was content relying on her neighbor’s charter school experience to influence her own decision-making. She did not see the need to research other schools or check school ratings because she received firsthand information from a friend. Table 12 provides a summary of themes that emerged from the interview.

Table 12

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant J*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help students better</li> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• Class size</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word-of-mouth</li> <li>• School visit</li> <li>• Media (social media, news, pamphlets)</li> </ul>

**Participant K.** Participant K described the smaller class sizes at the charter school as the main reason for enrolling her child. She suggested her son would receive a better education if the teacher had fewer students in the classroom. “I feel the teachers are able to give the students more one-on-one attention.” She identified the school’s location as being nearby and the family atmosphere as influential in her decision.

Participant K explained she acquired information about perspective schools through various internet vehicles, including Facebook, Instagram, and the school district's website. Along with reading parent reviews and online ratings, Participant K spoke with neighbors and friends to gather information about the charter school. "I think word-of-mouth is best." However, she also mentioned one cannot trust everything other parents say about the school. Additionally, Participant K explained the media played a large role in her decision to select a charter school. The positive information posted on websites encouraged her to enroll her child. She saw charter schools advertising creative programs on billboards. This influenced her because she wanted something different for her son. The negative traditional media exposure that highlighted local public schools did not influence her in selecting a charter school. Table 13 provides a summary of themes that emerged from Participant K.

Table 13

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant K*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High teacher quality</li> <li>• Dedicated teachers</li> <li>• Class size</li> <li>• Work at the school</li> <li>• Family environment/connectedness</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet (research)</li> <li>• Word of mouth</li> <li>• Reviews, ratings, Instagram, Facebook</li> <li>• Media (social media, news, pamphlets)</li> </ul>

**Participant L.** Participant L described the family atmosphere as the most favorable attribute associated with the charter school. She explained an intimate setting yielded better academic results because the teachers knew the children better. For her,

smaller class sizes equated to a more intimate community and better learning environment. She said:

I've always liked the small intimacy between the children and teacher and me and the teacher...instead of having your kid in a big old school, not to be known, not to know his ups and downs, his goods and bads.

Participant L explained how important the school's marketing was in recruiting her family to enroll. She was intrigued by biography for whom the school was named after presented at the school. Knowing the importance of role models, she was impressed by the school's desire to promote African American successes. "They shared that my grandson has the opportunity to be what he wants to be."

Although a private school was her first choice, she started investigating charter schools because they were free to attend. As a grandmother raising the grandchildren, her funds were limited. "I didn't have the money to pay for the school, like I had with my son. So, what I paid for at private school, I can get it here in a charter school." Table 14 provides a summary of themes that emerged from Participant L.

Table 14

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant L*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intimate setting</li> <li>• Family atmosphere</li> <li>• Class size</li> <li>• Positive environment</li> <li>• Free</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School visit (open house)</li> <li>• Information booths</li> <li>• School biography</li> </ul>



**Participant M.** Participant M constantly alluded to smaller class sizes and a focus on the educational needs of the students. He stressed the extra attention given to each child and “more interaction between the teacher and students.” He talked about fewer distractions at the charter school, along with a higher focus on education than at traditional public schools. Participant M stated, “there are more opportunities for students to succeed.”

Consulting with other charter school parents led Participant M to enroll his children. The experiences shared by other parents and online ratings positively influenced his decision to choose this charter school. “Ratings were a must in my decision to choose charter.” He talked about the media not influencing his selection of a traditional public or charter school. Table 15 provides a summary of themes that emerged from Participant M.

Table 15

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant M*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class size</li> <li>• Focus on student needs</li> <li>• More educational opportunities</li> <li>• Less distractions</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word of mouth</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Reviews, ratings of school</li> </ul>

**Participant N.** Participant N described smaller class sizes, school structure, and overall quality of the charter school as reasons she enrolled her children. Smaller class sizes “gives my child more time that they can actually spend with the teacher and be able

to work in even smaller groups.” Participant N went on to say students were “not just, more or less, a number.”

The small size of the school positively affected school organization and students were better protected. She stated the school was of higher quality because they tracked student progress and school activities more easily. The charter school’s intimate setting and uniforms encouraged her to choose the charter school. The experiences of other parents stimulated her interest in charter schools. “Then when I went onto the actual charter school and did the tour, the experience I received there just solidified how I felt.”

Negative traditional media highly influenced Participant N. She mentioned shootings, “exposure to negative things and situations,” and schools unable to monitor what was brought onto campuses. She used the internet to compare schools and read Facebook posts about both charter and traditional public schools. Co-workers and friends spoke highly of charter schools, which positively affected her decision to select a charter school. Table 16 provides a summary of themes that emerged from Participant N.

Table 16

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant N*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better than public</li> <li>• Smaller class size</li> <li>• Less exposure to the negativity in public school (drugs, shootings, etc.)</li> <li>• Structure</li> <li>• Test scores</li> <li>• Intimate setting</li> <li>• Uniforms</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Word-of-mouth</li> <li>• School visit/tour</li> <li>• Media (social media, news, pamphlets)</li> </ul>

**Participant O.** Participant O identified the charter school's long history of high academic performance and its safe environment as major attributes that made the school desirable. Safety was a major priority, as Participant O stated, "Maslow tells us that the basic needs must be met before we can teach the student." The local public schools had many security issues, sometimes resulting in lockdowns. His decision to select a charter school was also influenced by the availability of extracurricular programs and variety of educational opportunities.

Participant O was heavily involved in the local community and knew this charter school outperformed all other local schools, both traditional and charter. According to him, "all of the big wigs' children attend this school." Participant O went on many school visits and met with school staff before settling on this charter school. "I looked at all of the opportunities available to the students...[It] graduated a good amount with AA degrees" because it allowed high school students to earn a two-year degree concurrent with their high school diploma.

Although his status within the community afforded him the privilege of hearing inside information within many schools, Participant O still researched the schools via school report cards, healthy kids' surveys, and school reviews. The negative traditional news media given to some schools influenced his decision to choose a charter school. However, Participant O did not select the school because it was a charter, but because it was the best local school. "It being a charter really had nothing to do with my choice...there are both good and bad charter schools." He selected the charter school based on the school's flexibility, availability of programs, and knowledge gained by his involvement. Table 17 offers a summary of themes that emerged from Participant O.

Table 17

*Themes Identified from Interview with Participant O*

Research Question	Themes Identified
1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety</li> <li>• Long history of academic performance</li> <li>• Extracurricular activities</li> <li>• Local officials' children attend school</li> <li>• Programs/curriculum</li> </ul>
2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet research</li> <li>• School visits/tour</li> <li>• Community knowledge</li> <li>• Meeting with school staff</li> </ul>

**Data Analysis by Research Question 1**

This section of Chapter IV summarizes the most common themes that emerged related to Research Question 1. The common themes were first determined by the number of respondents who mentioned a given theme and secondly, how many times the theme was mentioned overall. Although attributes were stated (e.g., safety, uniforms, reputation) only the top themes were addressed in this section. Research Question 1 was: *What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?*

**Common theme 1: Smaller class sizes.** Twelve of 15 participants explained a smaller class size was influential in selecting a school. Many participants expressed too many students were in a traditional classroom for their child to be successful. One parent described the teacher as “not knowing my kid because there were too many kids in the classroom.” Another parent said, “the teachers are able to devote a little bit more attention to the individual needs of the students.”

Many of those interviewed described their child being able to receive more help from the teacher in a smaller class. Some participants spoke to the importance of class size and how it related to individual attention and fewer disruptions and distractions. During a visit to the charter school, a parent described being influenced by the fact “they didn’t have a lot of kids in the class.”

**Common theme 2: Educational quality.** Eleven of 15 participants valued the higher educational quality of their charter school. They explained charter schools offered more educational opportunities and extracurricular activities, and they were outperforming the district on state tests. One participant spoke of a neighbor’s child who was receiving specialized instruction and increased in both reading and math. Additionally, two participants noted their charter school had high standards and expectations for teachers and students alike. However, some parents had difficulty articulating exactly why the charter school was higher quality. One parent said, “I just know that they can help my children better.”

**Common theme 3: Nurturing atmosphere.** Ten of 15 participants believed the charter school embodied a family atmosphere. For example, one participant spoke of the happy staff, sharing “the staff is going to help create that culture and the kids are going to want to be there.” Another parent addressed having his son in “an environment where he would be nurtured.” A few participants explained the importance of the school staff developing positive relationships with students and their families. A grandmother raising her grandchildren explained a family atmosphere was important “because of the family atmosphere at home, so they’ll still have it at school to make it a whole round environment for them.”

**Common theme 4: Variety of programs/curriculum.** Nine of 15 participants described the variety of programs as a major trait that influenced their decision to select the school. These programs included specialty grouping, STEM, and arts that would enhance their child’s learning. For example, one participant stated, ‘I just wanted a school that would offer more options than what I was getting in a public school.’

Programs and curricula enticed parents because they extended their child’s learning or enhanced the learning in a way missing from the traditional public school. When the interviewees were discussing attributes, they also touched on the importance of wanting something different. For instance, one parent said, “It just seemed like a good idea.” Other parents echoed sentiments of variety, change, and charter schools being better. However, data for two of the schools did not show them as higher-performing on state tests. Table 18 presents common themes that emerged related to Question 1.

Table 18

*Common Themes for Question 1*

Themes Identified	Number of Respondents	Frequency of Responses
1. Smaller class sizes	12	40
2. Educational quality	11	19
3. Nurturing atmosphere	10	26
4. Variety of programs/curriculum	9	11

## **Data Analysis by Research Question 2**

This section of Chapter IV summarizes the most common themes that emerged related to Research Question 2. Question 2 was: *What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?*

**Common theme 1: Word-of-mouth.** Thirteen of 15 participants described the importance of talking to friends, neighbors, co-workers, and other parents to obtain information about schools. Though they utilized other sources of information, discussions with friends about their experiences was prevalent throughout the interview process. For example, one participant stated, “I would think the biggest thing was just the word-of-mouth, and then the actual visits to the campuses, because I’m not the type of individual to just go off what people tell me.”

Similarly, a few participants rated the information they received from other parents as having more credibility than any other source of information. One parent stated, “There’s more information than just numbers.” Another parent shared, “I pretty much went with what my neighbors said.” The word-of-mouth theme also showed up as an internet source because many people used social media to communicate.

**Common theme 2: Use of internet.** Twelve of 15 participants explained the internet was an integral part of researching schools. Many parents read school reviews online, examined school ratings, and used social media to read posts or discuss school quality. One parent commented, “I spoke with Facebook friends too. Then I looked to see how many stars [the school] had.” Parents also accessed the internet to see the grades, such as one parent who noted, “I just visited the school and looked up the grade that the state of California had put up for the school for testing.” Participants described how the posts from other parents helped them form their own opinion about a school. For example, one parent commented she knew everything about the school, “seeing from what these other moms have posted on here.”

**Common Theme 3: Media.** Eight of 15 participants stressed the importance of news media news in influencing them to select a charter school. The media played a major role “in trying to find a different setting for my daughter...you hear a lot about what [happens] on the campuses.” Another parent specified, “With San Bernardino, the negative attention that it gets on the media makes parents believe that their schools are not safe.” Four participants mentioned traditional public school teachers getting arrested for misconduct and violence on campuses as deterrents to sending their children to traditional public schools. Table 19 summarizes the common themes from question 2.

Table 19

*Common Themes for Question 2*

Themes Identified	Number of Respondents	Frequency of Responses
1. Word of Mouth	13	36
2. Use of internet	12	47
3. Media	8	15

### Key Findings

After the interviews were transcribed, they were coded for themes. Six key findings became evident regarding important attributes and sources of information important to parents of public charter school children.

#### Key Findings: Most Important Attributes

1. Smaller class sizes were noted by 80% of parents as why they chose a charter school over a traditional public school.
2. Educational quality was referenced by 11 participants for why they chose a charter school; however, some parents only described it as better or good without a clear definition of what made it high quality.



3. Two-thirds of the participants referenced a nurturing atmosphere, which seemed directly related to the smaller class/school size.

### **Key Findings: Most Important Sources**

4. Word-of-mouth was referenced by 13 parents (87%) as why they chose a charter school. With one charter being brand new and the parent being on the committee, and another parent stating they used social media to gain information, the word-of-mouth source could be linked to 100% of participants.
5. The internet as a means to obtain information about schools was used by 12 parents (80%). Some of the participants communicated using social media, which overlapped with internet and word-of-mouth although these were not explicitly stated.
6. Of the 8 participants who cited media as an important source, most described the negative light shed on traditional public schools as opposed to a positive light on public charter schools.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the attributes of public charter schools considered important for the selection of a charter school as perceived by the parents of charter school children. This chapter summarized the qualitative data collected from 15 participants interviewed by the researcher. All 15 participants were parents of public charter school children in San Bernardino County.

The chapter began by summarizing the interview findings from each of the 15 participants via a narrative description of the information shared and themes that

emerged. The themes with the highest frequencies were summarized in the last section of Chapter IV. The themes were clustered by research question and included a narrative detailing the theme. Chapter V summarizes the study's findings, explores unexpected findings, sets forth conclusions, denotes implications for action, describes recommendations for further research, and concludes with final remarks and reflections by the researcher.

## CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter reviews the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the methodology of the study. The chapter summarizes the major findings based on the results presented in Chapter IV and the review of the literature, as well as unexpected findings. The chapter outlines conclusions drawn based on the major findings. The chapter concludes with implications for action and recommendations for further research.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the attributes of public charter schools considered important for the selection of a charter school as perceived by the parents of charter school students. A second purpose of this study was to identify the sources parents used to inform their decision to enroll their child in a charter school.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?
2. What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before deciding to enroll their student in a charter school?

### **Research Methodology**

This was a qualitative case study used to determine why San Bernardino County charter school parents chose public charter schools over traditional public schools. The researcher interviewed 15 parents who met the following criteria:

- The parent had at least one child who attended a public charter school

- The public charter school was located within San Bernardino County
- The school recommended the parents to participate
- The parent was willing to participate and sign an informed consent form

### **Population**

The population for this study was identified as parents with children attending one of the 1,248 charter schools in the state of California, and the target population was the parents of the 26,158 students attending one of the 38 charter schools in San Bernardino County (CDE, 2017).

### **Sample**

This study utilized a nonprobability, purposive convenience sample. The sample frame for this study was selected to include parents of children who attended a public charter school within San Bernardino County. A total of 15 parents from 3 public charter schools were interviewed for this study.

### **Major Findings**

Findings were organized by research question and stemmed from the common themes described in Chapter IV. The first research question was designed to gather data as to what attributes of charter schools were most important to parents. The second research question was designed to gather data about how parents collected information about charter schools.

The major findings directly related to the common themes. The findings were ranked in order of the number of respondents who stated a trait or circumstance categorized within a given attribute. Although there were many findings, only the most repetitious findings were classified as major findings.

## **Major Findings from Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was: *What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?*

**Major finding 1.** The first major finding was 12 out of 15 parents believed smaller class sizes were an important characteristic of a school. Many parents equated smaller class sizes with more one-on-one time for each student with the teacher. Parents identified more attention, fewer disruptions and distractions, and a more familial environment for the school. From a parent perspective, smaller class sizes signified the teacher knew each child and his or her family better. Students had enough space to work and did not need to share resources, supplies, or technology.

**Major finding 2.** The second major finding was 11 of 15 participants believed public charter schools had higher educational quality than local traditional public schools. Educational quality encompassed the variety of curriculum and programs offered, the school's performance on tests, and parents impressions the teachers were better. Although some parents had data to support their statements, many parents who stated educational quality was a major attribute enrolled their students in a school that mirrored the district performance-wise.

**Major finding 3.** The third major finding was two-thirds of participants believed their charter school had a nurturing atmosphere. The atmosphere, sometimes described as environment or community, was mentioned 26 times. Many parents expressed a nurturing environment being of utmost importance. Positive relationships between students and staff were a major attribute. Positive interactions between parents and staff were also important as many parents were driven by a feeling or instinct. Some parents

believed their children would not be as successful if the teacher did not nurture the growth of their child. According to one parent, this entailed purposefully building a positive relationship with the student, extending learning beyond the typical assignment, and showing the teacher truly cared about the student.

**Major finding 4.** The fourth major finding was 9 of 15 participants identified the importance of a variety of programs at their school of choice. Many parents wanted a change from the traditional public school and were enticed by the various opportunities for extended learning. Full-day kindergarten was one parent's sole reason for enrolling her son in a charter school, and another parent expressed the culturally-rich curriculum taught as a major influence in selecting the charter school.

### **Major Findings from Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 was: *What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before deciding to enroll their student in a charter school?*

**Major finding 5.** The fifth major finding was 13 of 15 participants described the importance of word-of-mouth. Talking to friends, co-workers, neighbors, and family members was the method most participants utilized when seeking information about charter schools. The discussions were held in high regard because the parents were receiving first-hand information from a trusted source. Unlike simply using rankings and scores, the narrative explained details in a parent-friendly format. Parents trusted their friends and neighbors wanted what was best for their child. Although not every parent was content deciding solely based off hearsay, most parents were highly influenced by the positive experiences of their friends and family.

**Major finding 6.** The sixth major finding was 12 of 15 participants described the internet as being an integral part of researching schools. Nearly every parent expressed interest in obtaining score reports, school ratings, or using social media when gathering information regarding schools for their children. Some parents explained they did not use the internet for gathering charter school intel, yet read Facebook posts about certain schools or how well a friend's child was doing at the school. Parents only defined internet use as "researching something," even though engagement in social media involved the internet. As such, "hearing about it on Facebook" was coded as social media rather than using the internet.

**Major finding 7.** The seventh major finding was 8 of 15 participants cited media as a major source of collecting information. Social media notwithstanding, most of the 8 participants described the media's reports of negative events in public high schools as influencing their decision to enroll their children in public charter schools. The positive charter school attention from the media had virtually no effect on parent decision-making. Between the school violence, drugs, teacher arrests, and overall negative news reports regarding public schools, participants explained the media helped push them toward charter schools.

### **Unexpected Findings**

All the major findings from this study were to be expected and aligned closely with the literature review on charter schools. Participants described many attributes discussed in seminal works. An unexpected finding was how some participants did not rate school performance as a major influence in their decision to select a given school. Although educational quality was a major finding, it was not in direct relation to how

well the students performed on state tests. The parents' definition of a quality school centered on how well their child was treated, how the parent was greeted, and how the environment felt when they visited the campus. Although many parents mentioned they researched the charter school, only one parent described the school's academic performance as a major influence as to why he selected the school. Parents were more concerned with uniforms, the school's reputation, and whether the teachers would build relationships with their children.

## **Conclusions**

### **Conclusion 1**

Parents perceived one of the biggest advantages of public charter schools over traditional public schools was the smaller class size, which they believe was better for their child. Parents agreed a smaller class size was one of the most influential attributes aiding in the school selection process. Parents believed a smaller class was a better learning environment because of fewer distractions and more time available for their child. Regardless of its' truth, parents believed their child would receive more attention from the teacher if fewer children were inside of the classroom.

Pearson et al. (2014) agree parents desired smaller class sizes because "small class sizes in the early grades have long lasting effects" (p. ##) Other studies found class size played an important role in educational quality. For example, aside from benefits like fewer discipline problems and lower retention rates, teachers with larger classes gave fewer assignments or did not focus on written assignments because the workload was extremely high (GreatSchools, 2015).



## **Conclusion 2**

Despite educational quality usually identified by a school's academic performance on state assessments in math and reading, parents described their own interpretation of a quality school. For most parents, test scores were not mentioned when asked which attributes were most important in selecting a school. The school's reputation, which encompassed its level of safety, amount of bullying, connectedness of the staff to students and families, and the programs offered held more influence than the school's academic performance. Holley (2015) concluded a school's reputation and curriculum offered were the top two reasons parents selected a specific charter school. Parent perception of a quality school revolved more on how well staff and other students treated their child than the school's academic performance.

## **Conclusion 3**

Participants constantly stated how important it was to have an environment that cultivated their child's learning. Parents were highly concerned with how their child was treated and the quality of the relationships built with their peers and teachers. A happy, friendly staff could be the reason a parent enrolls their child, regardless of struggling test scores or low rankings. In an article geared toward helping parents select a charter school, the author informed parents teachers should be experienced, care about students, and nurture enthusiastic learners (Why Parents Choose Charter Schools, 2015). Parents also thought the school was more welcoming when it had a community feel or intimate setting. Pearson et al. (2014) reported a charter school limited class size to 18 students to promote intimacy. For parents looking for a change from traditional public schools, the charter's family atmosphere was influential.

#### **Conclusion 4**

Schools attracted parents by offering a wide variety of programs and extracurricular activities. Villavicencia (2013) reported parents valued the enrichment opportunities available at certain charter schools as opposed to the one-size-fits-all approach found at many traditional public schools. One parent stated her only reason for selecting a charter school was because it offered full-day kindergarten and had afterschool care until 7pm. Offering a program or curriculum not found at traditional public schools was one way to attract families interested in something different.

#### **Conclusion 5**

Parents trusted the information given to them from friends, family, co-workers, and others. These sources supplied potential charter school parents with information influencing them to enroll their children into charter schools, despite the local public charter schools not outperforming the local traditional schools on state assessments. Yet, parents of charter school children believe the school was a better option for their children. According to Villavicencia (2013), the choice to enroll a child in a school was based on what was rational to that parent, which differed from parent to parent. She reported many factors other than school performance influenced a parent's selection criteria. The negative media attention given to traditional public schools contributed to negative view of those schools. The negative light shed on the traditional public schools influenced some parents to enroll their children in a charter school.

#### **Implications for Action**

The researcher established a list of implications for action based on the literature review, major findings, and conclusions.

**Implication 1**

To limit the number of students lost to charter schools, school districts must provide smaller class sizes. This study found parents were drawn to smaller class sizes, regardless if the students were performing better.

**Implication 2**

Parents must thoroughly investigate whether the public charter school is really a better educational experience for their child. Parents need to investigate which of their beliefs are fact versus fiction, especially related to school performance and teacher qualifications. This study found parents were deciding to enroll their children in a public charter school based on the perspectives of other parents.

**Implication 3**

Public charter schools must increase efforts to encourage parents to recommend other parents to their school. These schools should have an open house night to inform potential parents about the school.

**Implication 4**

School districts must reflect on the role of the media in losing students to charter schools. The local schools are receiving too much negative media attention, making parents leery of sending their children to a possibly unsafe environment. School districts should designate a public relations role for the current administrator to make contact and provide positive stories about their schools as a way of informing parents about positive attributes.

### **Implication 5**

Public schools must intentionally focus on the positive climate of their schools by increasing positive customer services experiences for parents and engaging parents and staff in promoting this message. There were a variety of ways to find out what parents want from their local school. Many parents mentioned the importance of a positive, family atmosphere before academics. Local schools must find ways to increase their parent satisfaction ratings, such as inviting students and parents to share their perspective at faculty meetings or asking them to fill out surveys about ways of retaining students. Traditional public school leaders should seek feedback from their current families and act upon the information received.

### **Implication 6**

This study found parents wanted more educational options for their children. The local school districts need to make more programs available to parents. Parents were looking for longer school days, culturally relevant programs, and improved curriculum to extend and enhance their child's learning.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The following recommendations for further research were based on the results, conclusions, and limitations of this study.

1. Replicate the study with private schools versus traditional public schools to determine if the results remain the same.
2. Replicate the study separating elementary, middle, and high school to see if the results differ at different education levels.

3. Replicate the study in other regions of California or other states to see if the findings still hold true in those areas.
4. Conduct a study that examines how many parents removed their child from a public charter school and return to a traditional public school.
5. Conduct a quantitative study focused on the attributes of public charter schools using a large geographic and demographic sample.
6. Conduct a study focused on parents of special education students and/or EL students regarding the attributes of public charter schools they seek.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

I was contemplating opening a charter school, thinking it would eliminate the difficulties facing traditional public schools within the San Bernardino area. I thought more teacher autonomy and freedom from many district restraints would guarantee success. However, the local public charter schools fared no better than traditional public schools from a state test performance perspective.

During my literature review, the most important insight gained was learning a school is a school, whether traditional public, private, or charter. What really mattered was the teaching and learning took place within an educational institution. Plenty of great charter schools and traditional public schools exist throughout the United States; however, a multitude of low-performing schools of all types also exist. As educators, regardless of the school type, we should be gleaning the best strategies from each other, sharing what works, and using this collaboration to create a system of best practices for all to use.

The results of this qualitative study showed some parents selected schools based on an emotional standpoint. Some stated the teachers were good or the school was better, but their perspective was based on a brief encounters with staff from a new environment or hearsay from family or friends. Many parents seemed unhappy with their previous traditional public school and were in search of something different. As an elementary school teacher, I saw the revolving door of parents leaving the school in search of something different only to return. The question that remains is, “Is different really better?”

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A – SYNTHESIS MATRIX

	Charter Appeal	Educational Quality	Socioeconomic Status	Class Size	Parent Beliefs	Effects of Charter Schools	Student Achievement	Threat to Local Schools	Financial Implications
Arsen, D. & Ni, Y. (2015)	X	X				X		X	X
Berends, M., Watral, C., Teasley, B., Nicotera, A. (2006)		X				X	X		
Bifulco, R., & Ladd, H. F. (2006)		X				X	X	X	
Blazer, C. (2010)	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Chokshi, N. (2013)								X	X
Cordes, S. (2014)						X		X	X
Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2014)		X	X			X	X		
Fryer, R. G. (2014)		X		X		X	X		
Gill, B. (2016)						X		X	X
GreatSchools. (2015)	X	X		X					
Holley, M. (2015)	X	X		X	X				
Holley, M., Egalite, A., & Lueken, M. (2013)							X	X	X
Kleitz, B., Weiher, G. R., Tedin, K., & Matland, R. (2000)	X	X	X	X	X				
Leayman, E. (2016)	X	X							

Mosle, S. (2013)	X			X	X				
Murphy, J. (2017)	X	X		X		X	X		
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2016)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2017)		X		X		X	X		
Parents Across America. (2017)				X	X				
Pearson, E., Nolan, C., & Chapman, B. (2014)	X	X		X		X	X		
Quigley, B. (2017, April 25)		X	X						X
Rand Education. (2009)		X				X	X	X	
Ravitch, D. (2010)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ravitch, D. (2013)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sanchez, C. (2013)		X	X				X		
Schanzenbach, D.W. (2014)		X	X	X	X	X	X		
Schneider, M. (2016)	X	X	X			X	X	X	X
Villavicencio, A. (2013)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Why Choose Charter Schools? (2015, December 22)	X	X	X	X	X		X		

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

My name is Robert Moss and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the School of Education at Brandman University. I am conducting research involving parents of public charter school students. I have been an educator in the San Bernardino City Unified School District for 11 years. I have taught both elementary and middle school and served as a Program Facilitator at the elementary school. Currently, I am an Administrative Hearing Panel Member, hearing expulsion cases and managing a caseload of students at 17 schools. This letter serves as an invitation for you to participate in the research study.

I am conducting approximately 15 interviews with parents like yourself. The information you provide, along with the information provided by others, will provide vital information as it pertains to public charter schools. I will be reading the interview questions to each participant to ensure that I ask each question the same way each time.

### **Informed Consent**

I would like to remind you any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s) or any institution(s). After I record and transcribe the data, I will send it to you via electronic mail so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas.

Did you receive the Informed Consent and Brandman Bill of Rights I sent you via email? Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document?

We have scheduled an hour for the interview. At any point during the interview you may ask that I skip a question or stop the interview altogether. For ease of our discussion and accuracy I will record our conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Thanks again for participating in this study. Okay, let's begin.

### **Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about the educational quality of this charter school.
2. When you were making the decision to select a public charter school for your student what were some of the attributes you looked for to help make your decision.
3. Given the attributes you have mentioned what were the most important in making your decision?
  - a. Why do you perceive these as the most important for selecting a charter school?
4. Please describe some of the important attributes for selecting a public charter school?

5. Please describe some of the sources of information you utilized before selecting this charter school?
6. What would you describe as 2 or 3 of the most important sources of information to utilize to become informed?
7. Describe the information you received from these most important sources, which prompted you to select this school vs. your current experience as a parent.
8. How accurate was the information from each source?
9. Describe the role, if any, that the media played in your decision to select a charter school.

Thank you for your time and participation. This concludes our interview. I will send to you within the next week the transcription of our interview through electronic mail. If you have any corrections or additions feel free to send them to me. Thank you again so very much for your time and support in completing my research.

## APPENDIX C: RESEARCH QUESTIONS ALIGNMENT

Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>RQ 1: What attributes of public charter schools do parents perceive to be important in selecting a school for their student?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me about the educational quality of this charter school.</li> <li>2. When you were making the decision to select a public charter school for your student what were some of the attributes you looked for to help make your decision.</li> <li>3. Given the attributes you have mentioned what were the most important in making your decision?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Why do you perceive these as the most important for selecting a charter school?</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<p>RQ 2: What sources of information do parents of charter school students utilize to become informed before making a decision for enrolling their student?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please describe some of the sources of information you utilized before selecting this charter school?</li> <li>2. What would you describe as 2 or 3 of the most important sources of information to utilize to become informed?</li> <li>3. Describe the information you received from these most important sources, which prompted you to select this school vs. your current experience as a parent.</li> <li>4. How accurate was the information from each source?</li> <li>5. Describe the role, if any, that the media played in your decision to select a charter school.</li> </ol>

## APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT AND BILL OF RIGHTS

**INFORMATION ABOUT:** Why parents select *public charter schools over traditional public schools*.

**RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR:** *Robert Moss, MAE*

**PURPOSE OF STUDY:** You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Robert Moss, MAE, a doctoral student in the organizational leadership program at Brandman University. The purpose of this study is to identify and describe the attributes of public charter schools that attract parents to enroll their children. The study will attempt to determine parents' perceptions of public charter schools and the characteristics of these schools that lead parents to select them. There is already a lot of research on the academic achievement of charter school students, but not with why public charter schools are being selected. This study will fill that gap. The results of this study will add to the body of knowledge on why parents select public charter schools and what traditional school districts need to do to improve student retention within their districts.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in a 30 to 45-minute one-on-one interview with the responsible investigator. The interview will be conducted in person. Interviews will occur January through February 2018.

I understand that:

- a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping any identifying information on a password protected computer, online using password protected applications (i.e. Google Drive), or in a locked filing cabinet only available to the researcher.
- b) I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings, transcripts and notes taken by the researcher and transcripts from the interview will be destroyed.
- c) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input will add to the research on how to best support classroom teachers in their learning. The findings will be available to me after the study. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.
- d) If you have any questions or concerns about the research, feel free to contact Robert Moss at [REDACTED]; or Dr. Doug DeVore (chair) at [REDACTED].
- e) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any



negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time. I also know that I may ask questions about the study before, during, or after the interview.

- f) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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Signature of Principal Investigator

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Date

## **BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

### **Research Participant's Bill of Rights**

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.